

**Disentangling the Stratified Enactment of
Curriculum Modifications in Individual Education Plans:
A Policy Analysis**

Katherine Barron

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Education
York University
Toronto, Ontario

April 2026

© Katherine Barron, 2026

Abstract

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) have been central to Ontario's education system for over twenty-five years, yet one of the core components—curriculum modifications—has remained largely unexamined. Despite growing concerns about special education's limitations, little is known about why and how curriculum modifications are enacted. This dissertation addresses this gap by tracing the complex material-discursive forces that shape IEP decisions for elementary students in a large urban school system in Ontario, Canada.

Using agential realism, diffractive analysis, and policy ecology, this study moves beyond linear, individual-level explanations for the prolific use of curriculum modifications, towards a relational understanding of how curriculum design, grading practices, policy vacuums, resource scarcity, teacher dilemmas, family pressures, and broader socio-historical forces intra-act to produce Modified IEPs. Drawing from interviews with teachers undergoing the process of initiating curriculum modifications, focus-groups with special education leaders and administrators, policy documents, and the Board's quantitative data, this research identifies seven clusters of forces that structure the use and misuse of the curriculum modification policy.

The findings of this study expose significant inconsistencies in how curriculum modifications are understood and enacted, troubling patterns of “inappropriate” Modified IEPs, and evidence of stratified access to alternative forms of academic supports across socio-economic contexts and perceived ability of students.

Empirically, this dissertation demonstrates that, contrary to popular belief, the presence of an IEP is not simply a reflection of student need but a product of complex contextual forces that produce both its initiation and retention. Theoretically, this dissertation demonstrates the methodological affordances of agential realism, diffractive analysis, and policy ecology for education policy research. Together, these approaches illuminate contradictions, surface hidden dynamics, and render more comprehensive illustrations of the problems, resulting in more comprehensive plans for action. By centering complexity, embracing nuance, and cultivating an agonistic stance, this research serves as an invitation to rethink the IEP system in ways that serve students more justly.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation for all those who have supported me throughout the completion of my doctoral studies and this dissertation.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Gillian Parekh, for her enthusiasm for the project, her guidance, and unwavering encouragement. I would also like to thank Dr Sue Winton for her advice and thoughtful feedback over the years, and Dr Dave Cameron for his time serving on my committee. I'd also like to express my deepest gratitude for my peers for their intellectual curiosity, critical engagement, constructive feedback, proofreading support, and inspiration. I could not have completed this project without the vital support of our community.

I would also like to thank the participating school board for permitting this study within their schools, as well as all of the participants who generously gave up their time in order to share their experiences with this important topic.

Finally, I am profoundly grateful for my family and friends who provided both distraction and encouragement when needed. I am immensely appreciative of my husband and children for their unconditional love, profound patience, and the many sacrifices they have made to make this dissertation possible. This accomplishment is as much theirs as it is mine.



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Katherine Barron was supported in part by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
 Chapter 1: Introduction From Problems to Purpose.....	 1
1.1 - Special Education and IEPs in Ontario and the School Board: A Primer	4
1.2 – Research Rationale and Questions.....	14
1.3 – The Research Context: A Frightening Backdrop and Some New Core Values	17
1.4 – Methodological Overview.....	21
1.5 – Structure and Significance of Dissertation	27
 Chapter 2: Theory and Methods Agential Realism, Diffractive Analysis, and Policy	
Ecology for a Post-Critical Policy Analysis	33
2.1 – Theoretical Orientations and Frameworks.....	33
2.2 – Achieving Methodological Coherence	42
2.3 – Datasets and Methods.....	48
2.4 – From Limitations to Partial and Situated Knowledges	62
2.5 – Ethical Considerations.....	65
 Chapter 3: Background Information and Literature Review Charting the Historic and	
Contemporary Contexts of Curriculum Modifications	68
3.1 – A Policy History	68
3.2 – A Scoping Literature Review	73
3.3 – A Cross-Canada Comparative Content Analysis	84
 Chapter 4: Results and Discussion The Contours of IEP and Curriculum Modification use	
in the Board.....	87
4.1 – Prevalence, Distributions, and Subject Frequencies	88
4.2 – The Initiation and Retention of Curriculum Modifications	93
4.3 – Distinguishing Between “Appropriate” and “Inappropriate” Modified IEPs	103
4.4 – Racial Disproportionality in “Inappropriate” Modified IEPs in the Junior Division	111
 Chapter 5: Results and Discussion Curriculum, Evaluation, IEP Policies, and the	
Apparatus of Mistaken Failures	114
5.1 – Introducing Curriculum, Evaluation, Pass/Fail, and IEP Policies	114
5.2 – The Apparatus of Mistaken Failures and the Production of “Inappropriate” Modified IEPs..	130
5.3 – Racial Disproportionality in Grade Misalignment and the Relationship to “Inappropriate”	
Modified IEPs	135
 Chapter 6: Results and Discussion Variability in Grading, Grade-Levels, and the	
Subsequent IEP Decisions.....	148

Chapter 6: Results and Discussion Variability in Grading, Grade-Levels, and the Subsequent IEP Decisions	148
6.1 – Curriculum and Evaluation Vacuums, and <i>de Facto</i> Standards that Fill Them.....	148
6.2 – The Murky Relationship Between Grading and Grade-level.....	162
6.3 – A Policy Haunting and the Ghosts of a Norm Referenced Past.....	165
6.4 – Curricular Emphasis and the Limitations of a Single Grade.....	171
6.5 – Conflicting Opinions of when to Initiate Curriculum Modifications	173
 Chapter 7: Results and Discussion Dilemmas and Discourses of “Good Teachers” and “Bad Teachers”: Tracing the Social Forces in the Curriculum Modification Ecology	176
7.1 – Dilemmatic Apparatuses of the “Good Teacher”	178
7.2 – Deconstructing and Diffracting “Bad Teacher” Discourses	195
 Chapter 8: Results and Discussion Accommodations, Modifications, and the Missing Piece	207
8.1 – Conceptual Clarification: What are Accommodations?	208
8.2 – Conceptual Clarification: What are Modifications?	213
8.3 – A Conceptual Reenvisioning: What is Intervention?	222
8.4 – What is Special Education and Who Is It For? Toward a Long-Overdue Reimagining	225
 Chapter 9: Results and Discussion Scarcity, Triage, and the No Choice Reality of Modified IEPs	231
9.1 – The Context for Inclusive Education in the Board.....	232
9.2 – The Apparatus of the Provision and Scarcity of Intervention	234
9.3 – The Effects of the Discrepancy Between Policy Rhetoric and Policy Reality	255
 Chapter 10: Results and Discussion Pursuit, Refusal, and the Apparatus of Opportunity Hoarding	260
10.1 – The Polarizing Forces of Disproportionality Debates	262
10.2 – Opportunities, Affordances, and the Protection of IEPs.....	268
10.3 – Exclusionary Forces in the Apparatus of Opportunity Hoarding	277
10.4 – Implications for Equity, Research and Anti-Oppression Work.....	283
 Chapter 11: Ongoing Tensions, Recommendations, and Concluding Thoughts What is Special Education and Who is it for?	290
11.1 – Empirical Findings, Importance, and Implications	291
11.2 - Methodological Contributions	310
11.3 - Theoretical Contributions	311
11.4 - Toward an Agonistic Policy Analysis	315
Final Concluding Thoughts.....	317

References	318
Appendix A: Interview and Focus Group Questions	355
Appendix B: Descriptions of Variables used in the Quantitative Analyses	357
Appendix C: Scoping Review Search Terms.....	359
Appendix D: Scoping Review Tables of Results	360
Appendix E: Risk of New IEPs in the Junior Division by Race	370
Appendix F: Model Comparison	378
Appendix G: EQAO and Report Card Grade Mis/Alignment by Race	387

List of Tables

Table 4.1	Co-Occurrence of Modifications in Three Core Subjects	90
Table 5.1	Relative Risk of Starting a New “Inappropriate” Modified IEP Based on Grade Deflation.....	144

List of Figures

Figure 1.1	Continuum of Academic Programming	8
Figure 1.2	Grades 1-6 Provincial Report Card	12
Figure 1.3	A Visual Representation of My Understanding of the Curriculum Modification Policy Ecology	21
Figure 2.1	Convergences & Divergences: Agential Realism, Policy Ecology, and Critical Policy Analysis	48
Figure 3.1	The Lineage of the Current IEP Policies in Ontario	69
Figure 3.2	Scoping Review Search Results	76
Figure 4.1	Prevalence of Accommodation-only and Modified IEPs	89
Figure 4.2	Prevalence of Modifications in Reading, Writing, and Math	90
Figure 4.3	Distribution by Identification	91
Figure 4.4	Distributions by Placement.....	92
Figure 4.5	Initiation Points of Grade 8 Modified IEPs	94
Figure 4.6	Pathways Towards the Initiation of Modified IEPs in Junior and Intermediate Divisions	95
Figure 4.7	Distribution of Exit Points from Modified IEPs.....	97
Figure 4.8	Performance of Students with Grade 3 Math Modifications on Grade 3 Math EQAO	106
Figure 4.9	Performance of Students with Grade 3 Reading Modifications on Grade 3 Reading EQAO	107
Figure 4.10	Performance of Students with Grade 3 Writing Modifications on Grade 3 Writing EQAO	108
Figure 4.11	Grade 3 EQAO Performance of Students who went on to have Modified Curricula in Grade 6.....	110
Figure 4.12	Probability of Starting a new Accommodation-only IEP or new “Inappropriate” Modified IEP in the Junior Division by Race/Racism.....	112
Figure 5.1	Example of the Grade-by-Grade Progression of a “Specific” Reading Expectation	116
Figure 5.2	Description of Achievement Levels in the 1998 Report Card Guide	131
Figure 5.3	Description of Achievement Level in Growing Success (2010)	132
Figure 5.4	The Entangled Apparatus of Mistaken Failures.....	134
Figure 5.5	Comparison of Grade 3 EQAO Scores and Grade 3 June Report Card Grades	138
Figure 5.6	Detailed Comparison of Grade 3 EQAO with Grade 3 Report Card Grades (RC) - Math	139
Figure 5.7	Detailed Comparison of Grade 3 EQAO with Grade 3 Report Card Grades (RC) - Reading.....	139
Figure 5.8	Detailed Comparison of Grade 3 EQAO with Grade 3 Report Card Grades (RC) - Writing.....	140

Figure 5.9	Predicted Probability (PP) of Higher or Lower Report Card Grades (RC) in Reading	142
Figure 5.10	Predicted Probability (PP) of Higher or Lower Report Card Grades (RC) in Writing	142
Figure 5.11	Predicted Probability (PP) of Higher or Lower Report Card Grades (RC) in Math	143
Figure 6.1	“Spelling Age” of Students According to the Morrison-MaCall Spelling Scale.....	159
Figure 6.2	Examples of Conceptualizations of Achievement Levels and Grade-Levels.....	163
Figure 6.3	A Third Conceptualization of Achievement Levels and Grade Levels.....	165
Figure 8.1	The Contextual Dynamics of Accommodations and Modifications.....	210
Figure 10.1	An Agonistic Matrix for Understanding Disproportionality Arguments	265
Figure 10.2	Analysis of Dis/Proportionality Based on Race	284
Figure 10.3	Analysis of Dis/Proportionality Based on IEP Type.....	286

Chapter 1: Introduction

From Problems to Purpose

Curriculum comes into play only when teaching is attempted, and teaching is attempted only when learning is thought possible. (Danforth et al., 2006, p. 1)

“They aren’t allowed to learn that” she said, with a tone of frustration.

“What do you mean?” I asked cautiously, unsure of why students in Grade 8 would not be *allowed* to learn how to add and subtract negative integers in math class.

“Their IEPs¹ say they have to do the Grade 6 curriculum. Negative integers are not in the Grade 6 curriculum.”

I paused, confused by the situation. I was serving as an instructional coach in a large urban school board in Ontario. My job required me to travel to three different schools and work with students in Grades 6, 7, and 8 to prepare them for the transition to Grade 9.² Specifically, my job was to support classroom teachers to “close gaps” in the areas of Reading, Writing, and Math. With almost 15 years of experience as a special education teacher, many teachers warmly welcomed my support. This one did not.

“You have to teach what’s in their IEP. It’s a legal document.³ They are modified to the Grade 6 level, so you have to use the Grade 6 textbook.” Although I had spent most of my career insisting that educators enact what is outlined in students’ Individual Education Plans (IEPs), I was beginning to wonder if some IEPs were more disabling than enabling. The teacher thrust the Grade 6 textbook into my hands and stormed away.

When a teacher believes a student is not able to meet grade-level expectations, they may, in collaboration with other educators, choose to *modify* the general curriculum. In the Language

¹ An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a document outlining the specific strategies and resources that will be used to support a student. Not all students have IEPs. The presence of an IEP is what designates the student as being involved with special education. The role of the IEP and the processes of initiating one will be described in detail in the sections below and throughout the dissertation. For now, it is important to note that IEP policies and processes in Ontario differ substantially from most American contexts.

² In Ontario, students in Grades 6, 7, and 8 (roughly ages 11 through 14) are typically educated in “elementary” schools. In Grade 9 (ages 14 and 15) students enter “secondary” schools where they typically spend four years preparing to graduate from the Ontario public education system.

³ An IEP is not a legally binding document in the Ontario context; however, it is often believed to be.

and Mathematic subject areas, this often means that the student will work towards curriculum expectations from a lower grade level (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 26). These modifications are then outlined in an IEP—a special education document meant to ensure that the student receives the resources and supports they are entitled to (Mitchell et al., 2010). As a special education teacher and leader, I have spent over 15 years advocating that teachers comply with the strategies outlined in students’ IEPs. However, IEPs also require ongoing revision and assessment of their appropriateness. In the case of the students in the story presented above, I believed that the curriculum modifications specified in their IEPs were no longer serving their needs.

Modifying the curriculum is a common strategy for supporting Ontario students with IEPs. Although the practice of modifying the curriculum was originally developed as a tool for including students with “significant disabilities” (roughly 1-2% of students) in mainstream education (see Chapter 3), recent research shows that up to 15% of students in one Ontario school board are put on a modified program (commonly called a “Modified IEP”) by the time they reach Grade 8 (R. S. Brown et al., 2022). As a special education teacher, I often enacted curriculum modifications for my students—many of whom were identified as having intellectual disabilities.⁴ I used modifications to support their access to the general curriculum and set learning goals within their metaphorical “reach”—what Vygotsky called the *zone of proximal development* (Yasnitsky, 2018) and a widely accepted practice of a “good teacher” (Martin, 2019). For many students, I believed that curriculum modifications were enabling. For some, I was not sure. Once I changed roles and worked as an instructional coach in mostly general education settings, I saw a different perspective. I saw how one policy could be enabling for some students but disabling for others.

The students I was working with in the story above were all deemed to be incapable of grasping grade-level content by their teacher—a perception that I came to question after working directly with them for several weeks. They were making a lot of progress, and we had closed a

⁴ I use the term “identified as having intellectual disabilities” to acknowledge that it is a label imposed on people. By using this term, I also acknowledge that IQ tests have many flaws (including a racist history and ongoing cultural biases) (Dolmage, 2017; Gould, 1996; Withers, 2012) and that it is not possible to know the intellectual capabilities of individuals, especially those who do not use a formal communication system. A longer discussion of language choices will be provided later in the chapter.

lot of “gaps” in their learning.⁵ Yet, despite this progress, the classroom teacher, who was also the author of the IEP,⁶ believed that they must complete the entire Grade 6 and Grade 7 curricula before they could be “allowed” to attempt Grade 8 concepts.

I found the situation frustrating for several reasons. First, it did not fit with my understanding of the intent of the curriculum modification policy. Second, these particular students were all handling the Grade 8 content with ease. Third, working with negative integers was a key pre-requisite skill for the Grade 9 content they would face in the following year when they transitioned to a de-streamed secondary school⁷ where curriculum modifications were rarely permitted.⁸ It was therefore imperative for their future success that they had practice with this content. Yet, despite demonstrating the ability to work at grade-level, they were being actively prevented from accessing it. They were trapped.

Ontario’s curriculum modification policy emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s during a substantial overhaul to the education system. Its emergence was rather insignificant along-side the amalgamation of 129 school boards into 72, the centralization of school funding, a reduction of the education budget by nearly one billion dollars, the reintroduction of academic streams, the elimination of the formal fifth year of secondary education,⁹ the creation of the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) as a professional governing body, the introduction of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) and province-wide standardized testing, the implementation of the first province-wide standardized curriculum for every grade in every subject, the total restructuring of assessment and evaluation policies, and the formal introduction of IEPs (Jaafar & Anderson, 2007; Jang & Sinclair, 2018; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1997; O’Sullivan, 1999; Wien & Dudley-Marling, 1998). During this period of sweeping change, or

⁵ Ladson-Billings (2006) introduced the concept of “education debts” as a counter narrative to deficit-based achievement gap discourses, reframing learning gaps as shortcomings of the system rather than the student.

⁶ In Ontario, at the elementary level, IEPs are typically written by the classroom teacher (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004b).

⁷ “Streaming” (also known as “setting” or “tracking”) is the practice of sorting students into different instructional programs based on perceived ability. “De-streaming” or “de-tracking” refers to the dismantling of these policies. In a “de-streamed” secondary school, almost all students complete the same curriculum in Grade 9. The relationship between curriculum modifications and streaming/de-streaming will be described in more detail in the sections below.

⁸ Until recently, curriculum modifications were rarely used in Ontario secondary schools as altering the curriculum can undermine the integrity of the credit. Curriculum modification were only used in rare circumstances with permission from the principal (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004b).

⁹ The formal fifth year of secondary education was commonly known as the “OAC” year when students earned a minimum of six Ontario Academic Credits (OACs) to meet the requirements to graduate (Raphael, 1993).

“punctuated equilibrium” as policy theorists Baumgartner and Jones would call it (John, 2015), the logistics of curriculum modifications received relatively little attention.

Twenty-five years later, there has been virtually no research on the efficacy of the policy (see Chapter 3), and anecdotal reports from educators and families suggest that the practice of modifying the curriculum may have unintended negative consequences for many students. In February of 2022, the Ontario Human Rights Commission released the *Right to Read Report* detailing the findings of a two-year public inquiry into reading instruction in Ontario. While the report focuses on several more commonly identified barriers to literacy instruction, it briefly mentions the practice of curriculum modification as an area of concern:

Putting modifications in place for a student is a serious decision that may have life-altering negative consequences. When curriculum expectations are modified to a lower grade level, students often do not catch up to peers or return to the standard curriculum. Students who reach high school without meeting Grade 8 curriculum expectations are likely to be streamed into classes that limit their choices for future education and employment. Given the high stakes, modifications should be used only as a last resort. (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, p. 332)

Considering the prevalence of curriculum modifications and their potential for long-term consequences, their current policies and practices in Ontario schools warrant closer attention.

In this introductory chapter, I present the background and context for this dissertation. In Section 1.1, I provide an overview of special education and IEP policies in Ontario, establishing foundational knowledge for the chapters that follow. In Section 1.2, I present the rationale for the study and its research questions. In Section 1.3, I describe how the context in which this research was conducted shaped the dissertation. In Section 1.4, I provide a methodological overview, which sets the stage for Section 1.5 where I outline the structure of the dissertation, provide chapter overviews, and highlight the significance of this research.

1.1 - Special Education and IEPs in Ontario and the School Board: A Primer

Special education systems are notoriously difficult to understand. In this section, I provide some background information regarding special education, IEPs, and curriculum modification policies in the province of Ontario, as well as some policies specific to the large urban school board in which this research was conducted (hereafter referred to as *the Board*). This information will help readers understand and contextualize quotes from study participants in the chapters that follow. The information below is largely based on current policy documents

including *Special Education in Ontario* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017), *IEP Resource Guide* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004b), *Learning for All* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), *Ontario Schools – Policy and Program Requirements* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016), *Growing Success* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), and the Ministry of Education webpage *Planning for Students with Special Education Needs* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2024), and is supplemented with additional academic literature.

Program, Placement, and Professionals

The term *special education* means different things to different people. For some, special education conjures an image of disabled¹⁰ children receiving specialized instruction in self-contained classes. In practice, special education encompasses a wide range of “supports”¹¹ delivered by a variety of professionals, in a range of settings, to approximately 351,000 students (17.3%) in Ontario schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022a). Interestingly, roughly 68% of students identified through special education processes do not self-identify as disabled (Parekh & Brown, 2020). Conversely, there are many students who identify as disabled but are not involved with special education¹² (Parekh & Brown, 2020). These discrepancies are important to note because there is a common misconception that special education equates the education of disabled students, but this is not the case in Ontario (explained in more detail below).

Danforth, Taff, and Ferguson (2006) argue that special education policies have evolved over the past 200 years around three big debates: placement, professionals, and program. *Placement*, the most prominent debate, centres around *where* students involved with special education should be educated. The options are usually positioned on a spectrum between a full

¹⁰ Language choices in special education are both important and complex. Within the critical disability movement, there is substantial debate around the use of person-first language (e.g., “person with a disability”) and identity-first language (e.g., “disabled person”). While person-first language is often used in education and legal contexts (United Nations, 2006), many members of the disabled community prefer identity-first language as it acknowledges their pride in their identities, their lived experiences, and the ableist barriers they face (Linton, 1998a). However, applying these arguments to the education context is particularly difficult because not all students involved with special education are formally identified with impairments nor do they self-identify as disabled (Parekh & Brown, 2020). In recognition of the multiple viewpoints on this topic, I adopt both identity-first and person-first language in this dissertation. I have also occasionally provided additional explanations of language choices in the footnotes.

¹¹ I have enclosed “supports” in scare quotes because I am dubious that many special education practices actually provide support to students. Curriculum modifications is one such practice where often the only “support” provided is the lowering of expectations (see Chapter 9).

¹² See Parekh and Brown (2020) for an interesting discussion about how the discrepancies between self-identification and institutional identification are strongly mediated by gender, race, class, parental occupation, and sexual orientation.

time self-contained special education classroom and a general education classroom, with policy actors deciding which option will “meet the pupil’s needs and is consistent with parental preferences” (O. Reg. 181/98 Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils, 1998, p. H37). The debate about *professionals* is entangled with the debate about *placement*. The removal of students from mainstream classrooms is often requested or justified because of a belief that they will receive specialized instruction from a specialized teacher (see Chapters 7, 9 & 10); however, this is frequently not the case due to teacher shortages (Danforth et al., 2006) and because, in Ontario, the qualification to teach in a special education classroom is minimal and often focused on how to adhere to special education policy rather than how to provide “specialized” teaching (*Special Education Part 1*, 2025).

Though these two debates are important and situated in the policy ecology, the main debate of interest for this present study is that of *program*, or rather, what content students involved with special education should be taught. In comparison to the other two debates, this debate has received very little attention (Danforth et al., 2006). At the heart of this debate are the questions: Should students involved with special education (i.e., students with IEPs) focus on individually designed programs or follow the general curriculum? Should educators lower expectations or maintain high expectations? How are these decisions made? Such decisions are then documented in the IEP.

What is in an IEP? Accommodations, Modifications, and Alternative Programming

An IEP is:

a written plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a particular student, based on a thorough assessment of the student’s strengths and needs – that is, the strengths and needs that affect the student’s ability to learn and to demonstrate learning. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 6)

Within IEPs, there are three commonly used strategies to supporting access to curriculum: through accommodations, modifications, and alternative expectations.

Accommodation refers to eliminating barriers in the environment, teaching materials, instructional strategies, and assessment methods to create an equal opportunity for students to acquire and demonstrate knowledge and skills (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004a). Examples include extra time on tests, enlarged print, sign language interpretation, providing oral versions of tests, using text-to-speech/speech-to-text technologies, and allowing frequent breaks.

Accommodations *do not* change the curriculum content, level of instruction, or performance

criteria. Students whose needs are accommodated (but not modified), have access to the same educational opportunities as their peers; they can pass each grade level, and they can earn the standard Ontario secondary school diploma (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017).

Modification refers to changing (most often lowering¹³) the curriculum expectations for a student. In Language and Mathematics, expectations are often changed to a different grade level (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). For example, a Grade 4 student may be taught and evaluated based on the Grade 2 curriculum. In subjects like science and social studies, students typically work on simplified versions of grade-level expectations. It is crucial to note that students with Modified IEPs do not pass their grade level. They are *transferred* from grade to grade, not *promoted*. Curriculum modification is therefore a *de facto* form of *grade retention* (holding a student back) within the context of *social promotion* (a policy of keeping students with their same-aged peers even though they did not acquire the skills from the previous grade). The tensions between these policies will be described in more detail in Chapters 5 and 8.

Alternative Expectations are learning goals that are not included in the general curriculum. There are two different kinds of alternative expectations, but Ontario's policy language does not distinguish between them. First, for most students, alternative expectations are supplemental expectations, in that the student works towards these goals *in addition* to the expectations set forth in the general curriculum (which could be modified, accommodated, or neither). These supplemental goals often target skills like organization, self-regulation, or social communication and are based on teachers' professional judgement. The second form of alternative expectations in the Board are truly alternative, in that they *replace* the standard curriculum. In the Board, students identified as having intellectual disabilities, who are also placed in self-contained classes for students with the Developmental Disability (DD) exceptionality, usually have alternative goals in lieu of the standard Ontario curriculum. These goals align with the sections in Ontario's alternative report card and include areas like communication, functional academics, motor skills, and social skills (Toronto District School Board, n.d.). In the Board, most students in DD self-contained classes work on their alternative

¹³ It is important to note that the Ontario Ministry of Education also permits the use of curriculum modifications for the purpose of augmenting grade-level expectations, but this practice is not permitted within the Board because of implications for evaluation. Modification for enrichment is beyond the scope of this research.

expectations exclusively, although some students may have expectations that are modified from the standard curriculum in some academic areas.

To understand these program variations, it may be helpful to conceptualize the range of curriculum options on a spectrum (Figure 1.1). However, it is important to note that the full range of options are not necessarily permitted in every jurisdiction in Ontario. For example, many school boards do not allow students with the DD exceptionality to follow an exclusively alternative curriculum for their academic program (they follow a modified program in all subject areas). As another example, some boards, including the Board, do not permit the use of curriculum modification for the purpose of augmenting the curriculum for students identified with the gifted exceptionality.

Figure 1.1

Continuum of Academic Programming

Students in DD-self-contained classes usually follow an alternative curriculum	Up to 15% of the Board's students have modifications in one or more subjects	Most students exclusively follow the standard Ontario curriculum	Ontario permits modifications for enrichment, but the Board does not
Alternative Curriculum	Modified Curriculum	Standard Ontario Curriculum	Modifications for Enrichment

Note. Accommodations may be used at any point along the continuum as well as alternative goals that are supplemental to the student's academic program.

It is also important to note that many students have a mixture of accommodations, modifications, and alternative pages in their IEPs, but the particular combination of these components determines what *type* of IEP they have. Effectively, there are three different types of IEPs: Accommodation-only, Modified, and Alternative. A student may have one type of IEP in one subject and a different type for another (i.e., modified in Math, but accommodated in Language).

Accommodation-only IEPs. Accommodation-only IEPs (commonly called “Accommodated IEPs”) are when students have accommodations, but no modifications in a particular subject area. These IEPs may or may not also contain supplementary alternative expectations documented in pages commonly called “alt pages” or “page 3s.” Students with this type of IEP follow the regular Ontario curriculum, are evaluated according to the standard evaluation policies, and can pass their grade level.

Modified IEPs. Modified IEPs contain accommodations *as well as* modified curriculum expectations. These modified expectations also are outlined on page 3s on the IEP—a separate page 3 for each subject area being modified. These IEPs may *also* contain supplementary alternative learning expectations which are also documented on page 3s. Sometimes these IEPs can contain 15-20 page 3s depending on the subject areas being modified. Students with this type of IEP are evaluated based on their achievement of the goals documented in their page 3s (explained below). They do not “pass” their registered grade-level like their peers.

Alternative IEPs. In the Board, Alternative IEPs are only permitted for students in DD-self-contained classes. They contain accommodations as well as several page 3s outlining the alternative curriculum expectations that comprise their academic program. Students with these IEPs *may* also have modified curriculum expectations if they are accessing aspects of the Ontario curriculum. An analysis of these IEPs is beyond the scope of this study. This type of IEP was excluded from quantitative analyses (see Chapter 2).

Who Has an IEP? The Role of Identification, Placement, and Review Committees (IPRCs) and Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

Identification Placement and Review Committees (IPRCs) serve two purposes: (1) to determine if a student should be recognised as “exceptional” within the school system (*identification*), and (2) to determine the type of classroom in which the exceptional pupil will be educated (*placement*). In terms of *identification*, Ontario continues to use the same five exceptionality¹⁴ groups first introduced in 1981: Behavioural, Communication (Autism, Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Language Impairment, Speech Impairment, Learning Disability), Intellectual (Giftedness, Mild Intellectual Disability, Developmental Disability), Physical (Physical Disability, Blind and Low Vision), or Multiple exceptionalities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). In terms of *placement*, IPRCs determine which placement option will be most suitable for the student. Options include: a regular classroom (with indirect support, resource assistance, or withdrawal assistance) or a special education class (for some or all of the school-day). Though Ontario policy does not explicitly use the language of “least restrictive environment” as it is used

¹⁴ It is important to note that institutional identifications (or “exceptionalities”) are different than a medical/clinical diagnosis. For example, a student with Down Syndrome may be assigned an exceptionality of Mild Intellectual Disability (MID) or a Developmental Disability (DD) depending on their IQ scores and measures of their adaptive skills. A student with ADHD may be assigned the exceptionality of Learning Disability if academic performance is the primary concern, Behavioural if behaviour is the primary concern, or they may not qualify for any exceptionality at all.

in the United States, IPRCs in the Board are supposed to consider “if a student’s needs can be met in the regular class with appropriate support” (Toronto District School Board, 2024b, p. 98) before considering any self-contained placement options. Also, unlike many other jurisdictions in the U.S. and Canada, students in the Board do not need formal identifications or placement decisions from an IPRC, or any diagnosis of disability in order to be put on an IEP. This gap relates to how the legislation for IPRCs and IEPs first emerged.

IPRCs were first legislated in Ontario in 1980 with the passing of Bill 82 which amended the Education Act (O. Reg. 181/98 Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils, 1998). This landmark legislation introduced a legal requirement for Ontario school boards to provide special education programs and ended the practice of excluding disabled students from public education.¹⁵ Bill 82 had significant implications for the new provincial funding formula being introduced at the time (L. Reid et al., 2020). Since the MoE only had a rough estimate of how many students would require special education support (L. Reid et al., 2020), Regulation 554/81, promulgated under the Education Act, was passed requiring that school boards create a formal process for determining who would be eligible for special education services: the IPRC process (O.Reg. 554/81 Under Education Act (Special Education Identification Placement and Review Committees and Appeals), 1981).

In 1998, nearly 20 years later, IEPs were introduced into the Ontario education ecosystem (Ontario, 1998). IEPs came alongside the introduction of a new province-wide curriculum and new evaluation policies that created the need for an accountability system for students who would not neatly fit these new systems. Regulation 181/98 required that all students identified as exceptional by an IPRC must have an IEP. However, this regulation also left the IEP door open for students who had not yet gone through the IPRC process:

9. (1) In accordance with requirements under the Education Act, no pupil is to be denied an education program pending a meeting or decision under this Regulation. (2) Where an education program is provided to a pupil pending a meeting or decision under this Regulation, (a) the program must be appropriate to the pupil’s apparent strengths and needs; (b) the placement for the program must be consistent with the principles underlying section 17; and (c) appropriate education services must be provided to meet

¹⁵ Well, almost. Students with physical disabilities could no longer be excluded but students with intellectual disability could still be excluded if they were deemed to be “unable to profit by instruction” (ClarenceSmith, 1981, p. 201).

the pupil's apparent needs. (O. Reg. 181/98 Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils, 1998).

Section 9 of Regulation 181/98 effectively created a second gateway into special education via an IEP rather than an IPRC. This path was further solidified through the Ontario Human Rights Code that mandates proper accommodation and programming for all students regardless of IPRC identification (L. Reid et al., 2020). In other words, all students with an IPRC identification must have an IEP, but not all students with an IEP have gone through the IPRC process or have an IPRC identification.

Students who are involved with special education (i.e., students who have an IEP) but have not gone through the IPRC process are commonly referred to as “unidentified” students. By 2011-12 almost half of the students with IEPs in the Board were unidentified (R. S. Brown & Parekh, 2013). By 2022-23, nearly 58% of students with IEPs were unidentified (Tam & Armson, 2022). Although there is no quantitative data available, several participants indicated that they did not believe their unidentified students with IEPs had any formal clinical or medical diagnosis of a disability. In these cases, the students were put on an IEP because of (perceived or real) under-performance at school that may or may not be related to disability status. This heterogeneity raises a question that came up frequently in this study: Who is special education for? (Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10).

A final note about IPRCs is that while they are meant to determine identifications and placements within the special education system, they do not make decisions about academic programming or the contents of an IEP. IPRCs do not determine the accommodations or modifications for which a student is eligible. All academic IEP and programming decisions are made at the school level.

Evaluation and Reporting for Students with IEPs

When a student with an accommodation-only IEP is evaluated, the grade on their report card reflects their overall achievement on the general curriculum expectations with their accommodations (as outlined in their IEP) in place. Grades (percentage marks in Grades 7-8) or achievement levels (A's, B's, C's, and D's in Grades 1-6) mean the same as they do for any student without an IEP. For students with Accommodation-only IEPs, the box on the report card called “IEP” should *not* be checked (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2*Grades 1-6 Provincial Report Card*

Student:		Report		Rider statement: "This [grade/mark] is based on achievement of the expectations in the IEP, which vary from the Grade [current grade] curriculum expectations." (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 61)
Subject		1	2	
Language	☐ NA			An "IEP Box"
Reading	☐ ESL/ELD ☐ IEP			
Writing	☐ ESL/ELD ☐ IEP			
Oral Communication	☐ ESL/ELD ☐ IEP			
Media Literacy	☐ ESL/ELD ☐ IEP			

Note. Annotated image taken from the Grades 1-6 report card (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 103). The IEP box should not be checked for students with Accommodation-only IEPs; however, the box should be checked for students with Modified IEPs in that particular strand or subject area.

When a student with curriculum modifications is evaluated, the grade on their report card reflects their achievement on the modified expectations that are outlined in the page 3s of their IEP. For students with modifications, the IEP box on the report card *should* be checked and the following rider statement must be added to the comment box as shown in Figure 1.2: "This [grade/mark] is based on achievement of the expectations in the IEP, which vary from the Grade [current grade] curriculum expectations." (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

Importantly, if the student has reached their IEP goals, they receive a B. If they have exceeded the goals the teacher outlined in their IEP, they receive an A. If they have not yet reached what the teacher had predicted, they receive a C, D, R (failed), or an I (insufficient evidence to assess). As described in Chapter 7, it is not uncommon for teachers to simply give B's regardless of student progress because it reflects poorly on the teacher if the student either exceeded or failed to meet their predicted expectations (Stoch, 2018).

Alternative goals are not evaluated with achievement levels. For students on an alternative curriculum (those in DD-self-contained classes), anecdotal comments are provided on the Alternative Report Card Addendum. For students with supplementary alternative goals (those who follow the standard or modified curriculum for their academic programming), teachers *may* report on them anecdotally.

Modifications, Streaming, and the Grade 8-9 Transition

As will be demonstrated in Chapter 4 and throughout the rest of this dissertation, once a student is placed on a modified curriculum, they rarely return to the standard curriculum. For example, if a Grade 5 student's Math program is modified to a Grade 3 level, that modified level usually advances incrementally each year. When the student reaches Grade 8, the final year in the elementary panel, they are often still working on the Grade 6 (or lower) curriculum. This poses serious barriers for the student when they *transfer* (not “graduate” like their peers without Modified IEPs) to secondary school and are expected to meet Grade 9 curriculum expectations without having had exposure to the requisite content of Grades 7 and 8. This is especially problematic because curriculum modifications are rarely permitted in Ontario secondary schools—and only at the discretion of the principal—because they may jeopardize the integrity of credits and the attainment of an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD).

Until recently, curriculum modification (i.e. the lowering of expectations) was effectively enacted through the practice of *streaming* in secondary schools. Streaming, also known as *setting* in the U.K. or *tracking* in the U.S., is the practice of sorting students into different levels of courses (e.g., *Academic*, *Applied*, or *Locally Developed*) based on ability (or perceptions of it). Streaming has long been identified as a form of systemic marginalization with some minoritized groups being disproportionately directed towards non-academic streams (Clandfield et al., 2014; Oakes, 1990, 2005). In the 2018-19 school year, the Board began a three-year process of *de-streaming* Grade 9 courses by eliminating Applied courses and having most students enter a single stream.¹⁶ In 2020, the Ontario Ministry of Education (MoE) mandated that all secondary schools de-stream their Grade 9 programs by the end of 2022 (Alphonso, 2020). This policy change comes with significant implications for students on Modified IEPs.

Before the de-streaming process began, students with IEPs were usually placed directly into non-academic courses (e.g., *Applied* or *Locally Developed*) (Parekh & Brown, 2019). Since the elimination of the Grade 9 Applied stream, students with Modified IEPs now enter either the de-streamed Grade 9 courses with impossibly large gaps in pre-requisite knowledge, or Locally Developed courses that, while credit-bearing, do not provide a pathway to the Grade 10 courses and likely limit access to post-secondary opportunities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

¹⁶ The Locally Developed stream which was preserved for students who require substantial modification to course content.

While de-streaming Ontario secondary schools was unequivocally necessary on equity grounds, doing so without acknowledging and addressing the preceding role of curriculum modification in the elementary panel risks reproducing rather than resolving inequities. Furthermore, it places an unreasonable demand on Grade 9 teachers to bridge several years of curriculum for a significant number of students in their classes. It is therefore imperative that curriculum modifications are understood as a form of streaming in the Ontario elementary panel with significant implications for de-streaming efforts in the secondary panel—and as an important area for further research.

1.2 – Research Rationale and Questions

This present study emerged from a problem of practice that has yet to be examined in academic literature. As such, the rationale for this study is not grounded in discrete empirical, methodological, or conceptual gaps in academic literature but rather in the absence of a coherent body of scholarship on the topic (see Chapter 3). I entered this research with four “hunches” that were quickly corroborated through this study as well as through research I was concurrently involved with as a Research Assistant with the *Critical Transitions Project*¹⁷ under the leadership of Dr. Gillian Parekh at York University. These four rationales for research are outlined below.

Discrepancy Between Policy Intent and its Widespread Enactment

Based on my professional observations, I suspected that Modified IEPs were widely used in the Board and that their frequency of use far exceeded my understanding of the original intent of the policy. Data from the Critical Transitions project indicated that up to 15% of students in the Board were put on a Modified IEP by the time they reached Grade 8 (R. S. Brown et al., 2022). This frequency suggests that with a current enrollment of over 200,000 students (Toronto District School Board, 2025a), this policy is likely impacting tens of thousands of students in the Board, and potentially hundreds of thousands of students across the province. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 4, this frequency of use far exceeds the original purpose of the policy, indicating that this policy is currently serving other needs and warrants further attention.

¹⁷ The Critical Transitions Project, funded through a SSHRC Insight Grant, encompasses a collection of studies examining systemic ableism, racism, and the socio-cultural reproduction of inequity through schooling. Specifically, these projects examine students’ transitions through K-12 with a focus on how ability-based practices are institutionally embedded, impacting students’ future access to postsecondary education.

Negative Long-term Consequences and Connection to Streaming/De-streaming Policies

As described in the sections above, I suspected that, for some students, there were negative long-term consequences of being put on a Modified IEP. This was demonstrated in two Critical Transitions studies investigating the impacts of curriculum modifications. First, one study investigated the relationship between elementary IEP types and Grade 9 streaming. Using a critical quantitative analysis methodology, we employed descriptive statistics and a multinomial logistic regression analysis to show that students with Accommodation-only IEPs had 4 times the odds of entering non-academic programs compared to those without IEPs, but students with a Modified IEPs had 40 times the odds of entering non-academic programming compared to those without IEPs (K. Barron, Kim, et al., 2024). This finding confirmed the strong relationship between Modified IEPs and streaming, thereby demonstrating its relevance and importance to de-streaming research, policies and practices.

The other study investigated the long-term implications of modifying the Grade 8 Mathematics curriculum on post-secondary pathways. Using a critical quantitative methodology, Brown and colleagues (2022) conducted a binary logistic regression analysis of 11,109 students to explore the relationship between Modified IEPs in Grade 8 Math and applications to post-secondary programs. Controlling for Grade 6-8 Math achievement, disability, learning skills, and socio-demographic variables, students with modifications in at least one of the five strands of the Grade 8 Math curriculum had 58% lower odds of applying for post-secondary programs compared to students without IEPs. This finding suggests that the presence of a Modified IEP in elementary school is a strong predictor of post-secondary pathways. Taken together, these studies suggest long-term implications for initiating a Modified IEP, which further demonstrates the need for additional research on the topic.

Disproportionate Over-representation of Some Marginalized Groups

Based on my experiences travelling between schools as an instructional coach, I suspected that there were patterns of policy enactment across students and across schools based on socio-economic status and race. Both of the Critical Transitions studies described above showed disproportional over-representation of some racialized groups (Black, Latine, Middle Eastern, & Multi-racial students) on a modified curriculum. Specifically, Black students were more than twice as likely to be placed on a Modified IEP compared to white students (R. S. Brown et al., 2022).

Mechanisms of Systemic Oppression

With evidence of disproportional racial over-representation and negative long-term outcomes, both anecdotal evidence and emerging research suggest that curriculum modification may be operating as a mechanism for systemic oppression (K. Barron, Kim, et al., 2024; R. S. Brown et al., 2022). As many scholars have argued, institutions play a central role in both producing and reproducing social inequities that echo settler colonial projects of power, hierarchy, and control (Ahmed, 2016; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Bourdieu, 1973; Freire, 1968; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Educational institutions in particular function as key sites of structural oppression, actively participating in the reproduction of inequities through mechanisms such as streaming (Ellis & Axelrod, 2016; Oakes, 1990), uneven access to quality schools and specialty programs (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Parekh et al., 2016; Parekh & Brown, 2019), inequitable funding and fundraising models (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Winton, 2019), hegemonic values in curriculum (Apple, 2004; Erevelles, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2021), disciplinary systems (A. A. Ferguson, 2000; Owens, 2022), micro-aggressions and cultures of exclusion (Parekh, 2014; Solorzano, 1998), and high stakes standardized testing (Au, 2022; Dixon-Román, 2017).

Special education is also frequently highlighted as a location of structural inequities (Domina et al., 2017; Dunn, 1968; Ellis, 2019; Ferri & Connor, 2005a). Disproportionality—the over- or under-representation of groups based on social identities—has been identified in referral processes (Artiles, 2011; Fish, 2022), special education identifications (Annamma et al., 2013a; Artiles et al., 2010), and placement in programs associated with limited future opportunities (Mitchell, 2010, 2015a; Parekh et al., 2016; Parekh & Brown, 2019). Further research is needed to determine if the use of curriculum modifications is also functioning as a mechanism of systemic oppression in the Board.

Research Questions

The patterns outlined above point to a significant but under-examined issue in the Ontario school system that potentially impacts hundreds of thousands of students, as well as recent efforts to de-stream Ontario secondary education. With virtually no existing scholarship on the topic, and emerging evidence suggesting negative long-term consequences that disproportionately affect some racialized groups, it is essential that the policy of curriculum modification is systematically interrogated through both applied and academic research.

While this topic is essentially a blank canvas and there are many important areas to investigate, the present study focuses on the factors that lead educators to initiate Modified IEPs for their students. Specifically, in language that aligns with the guiding ethico-onto-epistemology of this research—agential realism (outlined in Section 1.4)—this research asks: How are enactments of the curriculum modification policy produced? What configurations of institutional conditions (apparatuses) make these enactments possible? What effects do these apparatuses generate? Together, these questions destabilize the assumption that the initiation of a Modified IEP simply reflects student need and shift the focus to the broader institutional conditions that produce these decisions.

1.3 – The Research Context: A Frightening Backdrop and Some New Core Values

I started envisioning this project long before I was accepted into the PhD program at York University. I was driven by a persistent curiosity about which factors led to the decision to enact curriculum modifications. I questioned their efficacy in enabling students and, like Dunn in their seminal work on disproportionality in special education, I wondered, “is much of it justifiable?” (Dunn, 1968). At the same time, I found myself caught in a tension: while I often believed this practice to be disabling for many students, I also recognized that, for some—particularly the students I had taught for over a decade and cared deeply about—it was profoundly enabling.

I’ve been completing this PhD against the backdrop of a world on fire. I started the program shortly after the murder of George Floyd and I am finishing it shortly after the murder of Charlie Kirk. In between, we endured the Covid-19 pandemic, witnessed the events of October 7th, and continue to watch in horror as the war in Gaza unfolds. All of these events have fueled the polarization of discourses of race, equity, and human rights, and have effectively ended close relationships amongst friends and family members in my communities. With the frightening and ever-looming impacts of political polarization foreshadowing an unknown future, I have started seeing the harm of binary logics and us/them divides everywhere I look, including in education research.

The Danger of Binary Thinking and Polarization in Policy Studies

Research can be polarizing. It often engages with controversial ideas, differing theoretical perspectives, and competing interpretations of evidence. In his book, *When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in an Age of Polarization*, Brubaker (2019) defines polarization as

the process by which more and more people in a [social system such as a family, a community, an organization, or a] society come to hold opinions at the more extreme ends of the spectrum, while the number of people in the moderate center dwindles. (p. 3)

Education is often shaped by polarizing debates, such as phonics versus whole language, inclusive education versus special education, and inquiry versus “back-to-basics.” These highly contentious debates, sometimes insensitively referred to as “wars” (Berkshire & Schneider, 2024; Pearson, 2004; Schoenfeld, 2004), often result in either/or approaches that pits policy “winners” and “losers” against each other.

In a foundational piece of public policy scholarship, Baumgartner and Jones argued that *policy monopolies* (i.e., a small number of leaders, politicians, or interest groups) could exclusively govern an area of public policy for long periods of time—a period of equilibrium (John, 2015). But, as John (2015), summarized their theory,

This equilibrium can be disrupted by new ideas about policy problems... As more people get involved with a debate, they attract still more participants in their immediate networks by creating an upswing of interest, a surge in attention that accelerates in a non-linear fashion. The policy topic then opens up to general debate and discussion right across the political system and in full public view. The momentum for a change in policy soon becomes unstoppable and *a punctuation* or significant policy change can occur whereby *decisions lurch from an old to a new consensus*. (p. 580, *emphases added*)

Slavin (1999) described a similar process in what he called the “pendulum of faddism in education.” He argued that the pendulum swings back and forth between educational trends as a result of “a cycle of enthusiasm, widespread dissemination, disappointment, and eventual decline” (1999, p. 374).

Though neither Baumgartner and Jones nor Slavin emphasize the role of conflict or polarization in their theories, I argue that polarization is deeply entangled in the dynamics of change. As policy monopolies break down or as the pendulum of educational faddism swings, new ideas are rarely uncontested. Layering on the work of Brubaker (2019) and the five stages of polarization, we can see how shifts in polarizing discourses can shut down productive dialogue, and end with dichotomous policy options that are ultimately determined by the policy actors who hold the most power at the time. He writes,

First, when a system polarizes, individuals retreat into discrete “affinity groups” that share common beliefs and values, and they tend to cut off relationships with those who don’t share their stance... Second, the focus in high-level conflict shifts from “issues” to “personalities” ... Third, any information that does not support one’s “position” is either ignored or discredited.... By Levels Four and Five, it doesn’t matter to the combatants

what is being communicated so much as who is communicating. The plaintive call for “more information” or “better education on the issues” is understandable but also unproductive at these high levels of conflict. The brain seems unable to receive information from an individual or group it considers “the enemy,” and it dismisses information that contradicts strongly held beliefs regardless of the source. (p. 7-9)

In other words, increasing ideological divides shut down productive dialogue, resulting in either/or approaches to education policy that pit “winners” against “losers,” and fuel policy pendulums that fail to fix the problems at either pole of the debate. Instead, these policy pendulums reopen old conflicts at each turn and leave the underlying issues unaddressed.

I was (and still am) very nervous about this research contributing to a knee-jerk policy response that fails to address the complexity and nuance of the issues. I have, after all, witnessed several policy pendulum swings during my time in the teaching profession. Therefore, to be clear, in this present study I do not seek to prove that curriculum modifications are either good or bad, protective or oppressive, enabling or disabling; such binary thinking would oversimplify a complicated and messy reality. Instead, I contemplate *when, why, how, and for whom* curriculum modifications are enacted for the purpose of charting system patterns and identifying areas for further investigation, discussion, and hopefully, improvement.

Answering the Call to Complexity

I acknowledge the unusual breadth of this dissertation but argue that such scope is not only justifiable but wholly necessary within policy research in general (Ball et al., 2012; Weaver-Hightower, 2008; Young et al., 2024), and the topic of curriculum modification in particular. This argument is supported by at least three key motives. First, as outlined in Chapter 3, there is almost no current research on the use of curriculum modification for students who have not been identified as having intellectual disability. I therefore approach this topic with an exploratory stance, aiming to notice as much as possible about curriculum modification policies and their enactment. As Stebbins writes, exploratory research “is not finished until everything of importance for describing and understanding the area under study has been discovered. In other words, exploration for discovery aims to be as broad and thorough as possible” (Stebbins, 2001, p. 12). While I do not claim to have identified “everything of importance,” (ibid.)—such a claim would not resonate with my onto-epistemological views—I have tried to be as comprehensive as possible, while still finding a way to finish the project. After all, a good dissertation is a done dissertation.

Second, there is danger in oversimplifying complex policy issues as it may lead to binary thinking, polarization, and policy pendulums. Some scholars have suggested that embracing complexity can be an antidote to polarization (Courageous Dialogues, 2022; Inglis & Steele, 2005)—one of my key concerns in conducting this research. Inglis and Steele (2005) write,

even well-intentioned approaches to governance that include public participation in decision making often fail to grapple with the complexity of issues and end up creating polarized debate and divisiveness. (p. 35)

They go on to argue that *complexity intelligence*—the capacity to recognize a gap between our current assumptions and the issues themselves, the perseverance to engage in confusion, contradiction, and frustration as we question our gaps, and openness to new concepts that help reconcile the gaps—is essential to avoid polarization when addressing social issues (p. 37).

Third, calls to complexity have also been expressed in policy and education reform scholarship. Many have argued that since policy issues are fundamentally complex, they require complex responses (Ball, 1993; Diem et al., 2014; Eisner, 1992; Levinson et al., 2009; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). In his 1992 essay, *Educational Reform and the Ecology of Schooling*, curriculum theorist Elliot Eisner attributed policy makers’ “feckless piecemeal efforts” at education reform to their inability to understand schools as “living organisms” (p. 619). He writes,

Minor efforts at change are eventually swamped by the factors in the school that do not change. Robust systems can withstand minor incursions. Thus the need, I believe, is to think about school reform ecologically, or at least systemically... For example, efforts to help teachers learn how to teach inductively are not likely to succeed if the evaluation system the school employs rewards other types of teaching... Efforts to create intellectual coherence in the student’s understanding are likely to fail if the form that the curriculum takes makes coherence impossible... It is important in educational reform to think big even if one must start small. There needs, I believe, to be an overall conception of what schools are...as *living organisms*. (p. 619, *emphasis added*)

Other scholars have used ecology as a metaphor to map the complex relationships in education systems (B. Barron, 2006; Hecht & Crowley, 2020; Lea, 2024; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). Often, work using this metaphor draws from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of human development, and can be superficially limited to material entities (see Barton et al., 2004; Farley & Chamberlain, 2021); however, there are some examples of the ecology metaphor employed in Critical Policy Analysis that illustrate the more complex relationships among material-discursive

factors. In this present study, I follow Weaver-Hightower (2008) and Lea (2024) in employing policy ecology as a theoretical frame, which will be described in detail in Chapter 2.

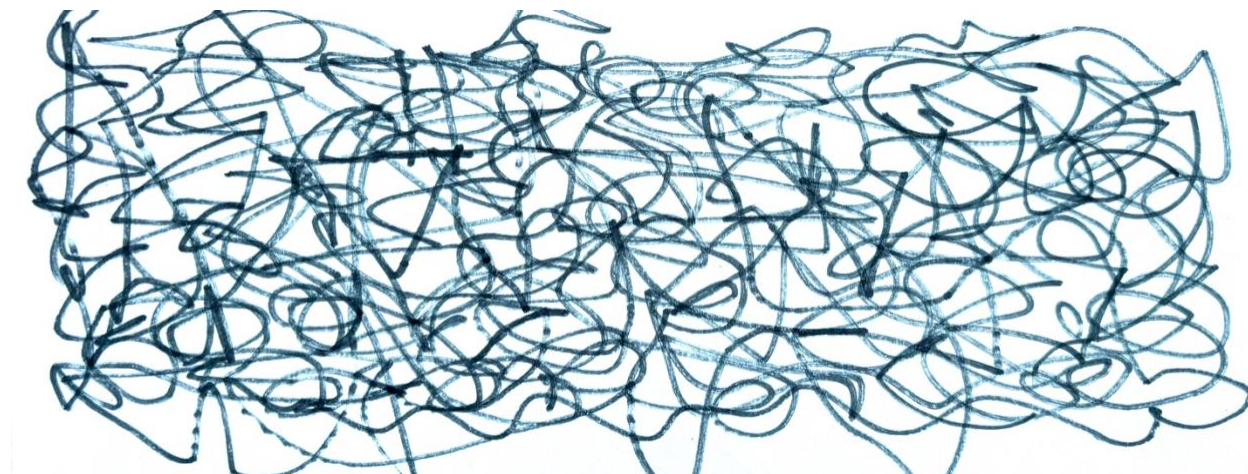
1.4 – Methodological Overview

This book is about entanglements. To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. (Barad, 2007, Loc. 57)

I have always had a hard time seeing the trees through the forest and I rarely understand the world in fixed, definitive terms. When confronted with certainty, my instinct is to respond with a quiet “yeah, but...” or a speculative “well, what if...?” Such questioning makes it difficult for me accept certainty and draw definitive conclusions. Perhaps this disposition reflects a neurodivergent way of thinking—always seeing infinite connections and contradictions diverging from a “central” idea. Or perhaps it is from a tendency to play a mediating role in group dynamics—holding multiple perspectives in tension while searching for commonalities despite the few points of divergence. Whatever the origins, this tendency made several aspects of this project extremely challenging, including trying to restrict its overall scope, limiting myself to *only* one or two research methods and theoretical orientations, and, most significantly, finding a way to explain the complicated entanglements (Figure 1.3) in a neat, linear, readable way.

Figure 1.3

A Visual Representation of My Understanding of the Curriculum Modification Policy Ecology



Note. Hand drawn sketch of a chaos pattern.

After being stuck at the analysis stage for over two years, overwhelmed with the sheer number of directions the data was pulling me in, I accidentally stumbled upon the work of Karen Barad, a theoretical physicist, feminist philosopher, and the originator of *Agential Realism*—a relational ontology that helped me put my analysis into perspective.

Agential Realism

In her 1996 essay, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad argued that both social constructivism and scientific realism were inadequate on their own. She argued the need for a theory that recognized the realism of the material world but that was also attentive to the language, discourses, and social dimensions of the constructed world. By putting Niels Bohr's philosophy of physics in conversation with post-structuralist social theory, Barad (2007) combines a realist ontology (often associated with constructivism's antagonist: positivism) with a social constructivist epistemology, producing an onto-epistemology she calls agential realism.

Agential realism challenges the idea that the universe is made up of independent, pre-existing entities that interact with each other. Instead, Barad argues that all entities, both human and non-human, are produced through *intra-actions*—a term she offers to emphasize the relational constitution of entities. In other words, phenomena do not precede their relations; they are produced by them. Central to agential realism are the concepts of *apparatus* and *agential cuts*. Barad describes an apparatus as an entangled configuration of material-discursive forces that, through their intra-actions, produce a particular phenomenon. Agential cuts are the boundary-making processes that define the contours of apparatuses and phenomena. They establish what is included and what is excluded, what is “seen” or “not seen,” or in Barad's terms, what aspects “come to matter” (Barad, 2007).

Closely associated with the broader post-structuralist and post-humanist movement known as the *new materialisms* (e.g., Bennett, Braidotti, and Coole & Frost), agential realism emphasises the agency of nonhuman entities and the “simultaneously material and cultural nature of the ontology of the world” (Barad, 1996, p. 181). This relational ontology disrupts many taken-for-granted binaries that have dominated social theory. As Barad (2007) writes,

I propose “agential realism” as an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of human *and* nonhuman, material *and* discursive, and natural *and* cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices, thereby moving such considerations beyond the well-worn debates that pit constructivism against realism, agency against structure, and idealism against materialism. Indeed, the new philosophical framework that I propose entails a rethinking of fundamental concepts that

support such binary thinking, including the notions of matter, discourse, causality, agency, power, identity, embodiment, objectivity, space, and time. (Loc. 682, *emphasis in original*)

The destabilization of taken-for-granted binaries has significant implications for research as Barad effectively destabilizes the often-presumed separation between the subject (the researcher) and the object (the researched).

Unlike positivist theories that position the researcher outside reality looking in, and post-structural theories that position the researcher within reality but unable to “know” it (Crotty, 1998), Barad argues that all things, including researchers, *produce* reality by intra-acting *within it*. According to agential realism, the researcher/knower/observer and their practices are entangled with the very thing they seek to study, and therefore, the knower *can* know reality because they are part of its production. As Barad (2007) writes,

There is no such exterior position where the contemplation of this possibility makes any sense. We are of the universe—there is no inside, no outside. There is only intra-acting from within and as part of the world in its becoming. (Loc. 8732)

This has profound implications for research ethics and, by extension, justice. If knowledge materially reconfigures the world, then research is never neutral and the researcher must attend carefully to the effects of their knowledge making practices. Barad therefore describes agential realism as an “*ethico-onto-episto-mology*” (Loc. 2040, *emphasis added*). She argues that ethics are inseparable from ontology and epistemology because what we study, how we study it, and what we exclude through agential cuts have real material consequences for real human and non-human lives. She writes,

the point is not merely that knowledge practices have material consequences but that practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world. Which practices we enact matter—in both senses of the word. Making knowledge is not simply about making facts but about making worlds, or rather, it is about making specific worldly configurations—not in the sense of making them up ex nihilo, or out of language, beliefs, or ideas, but in the sense of materially engaging as part of the world in giving it specific material form. (Loc. 2073)

Deciding what counts as inside or outside the agential cuts—whose perspectives are included or excluded, what matters and what does not—is always a question of justice. These decisions carry political and ethical consequences and as such, justice is not just a focus of agential realism, but rather woven into its core. As Barad (2007) writes,

We (but not only “we humans”) are always already responsible to the others with whom or which we are entangled, not through conscious intent but through the various ontological entanglements that materiality entails. What is on the other side of the agential cut is not separate from us—agential separability is not individuation. Ethics is therefore not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part. (Loc. 8667)

This ethical responsibility and accountability resonates with my concern about the effects of my research, particularly, inadvertently contributing to polarization and policy swings in special education that create as many problems as they solve. I also acknowledge that I am entangled in this research. My lived experiences, both personal and professional, are inseparable from the design, analysis, and the resulting observations. I am part of the entangled apparatus of curriculum modification, and therefore part of its production as a phenomenon with material consequences. This positioning has significant implications for positionality and reflexivity which will be taken up in further detail in Chapter 2.

A Diffractive Methodology

Building on Donna Haraway’s work, Barad (2007) turned the metaphor of “diffraction” into a methodology for investigating entanglements and their effects. She writes,

What is entailed in the investigation of entanglements? How can one study them? Is there any way to study them without getting caught up in them? What can one say about them? Are there any limits to what can be said?... I hope my exploration will make clear that entanglements are highly specific configurations and it is very hard work building apparatuses to study them, in part because they change with each intra-action. (Loc. 1736)

While Barad is referring to “building apparatuses” in a literal sense in the context of experimental physics (i.e., slit lamps), she is also referring to the process of selecting multiple methods of analysis (i.e., apparatuses), often from different disciplines, to read insights from each method “through” one another. In other words, a diffractive methodology is a multi-method approach that attends to the “interference patterns”—the convergences and, more importantly, the divergences of observations that are produced through different methods (Barad, 1996, 2007; Dixon-Román, 2017). Specifically, it focuses on the effects of differences. As Barad (2007) writes, “[diffractive methodology] is a commitment to understanding which differences matter, how they matter, and for whom” (Loc. 2073)—a commitment that highlights the fundamental equity and justice orientation of diffractive analysis.

On the surface, diffractive analysis may resemble mixed-method research; however, there are at least four key distinctions between the methodologies. First, the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions differ, with diffractive analysis drawing from agential realism and mixed methods research typically aligning with positivist, pragmatist, or critical orientations (Greene et al., 1989). Another key difference is in the method itself. Central to diffractive analysis is the method of reading texts “through” one another. In more conventional methodologies, including mixed methods research, researchers might analyse two or more texts (i.e., a policy, dataset, a discourse, etc.). They might compare and contrast “A” with “B” and then draw conclusions about them. In diffractive analysis, when objects are “read through” each other, the unit of analysis is not “A” or “B” but rather the combination of “A” and “B” together: What do they look like in combination? Where and how do they overlap? Where and how are gaps produced? What is most apparent through their combination? What becomes inapparent through their combination? These questions can guide the research in new and often creative directions.

Similarly, a third key difference in the methodologies is in how they attend to difference. In most mixed-methods research, different methods are often used to corroborate or triangulate findings in order to strengthen the validity (or perceived validity) of the study (Greene et al., 1989). In these cases, differences revealed between methods are often viewed as problems to be resolved. Some mixed methods studies, however, use discrepancies more generatively. As Green and colleagues (1989) explain, contradictions can also be “intentionally analyzed for fresh insights invoked by means of contradiction and paradox and lead to the initiation of new investigations” (p. 260). On the surface, this use of mixed methods appears to be closer to a diffractive analysis; however, while they both seek to understand the divergences in data, a diffractive approach emphasises the *effects* of the divergences or, in other words, the phenomena that the differences produce. For example, if a traditional or critical study of a policy revealed a discrepancy between policy texts and policy implementation, a mixed methods design might lead to an investigation into why that discrepancy exists and then make recommendations for how to improve their alignment. While a diffractive analysis may also begin by identifying why the discrepancy exists—or rather, what configuration of forces produces the discrepancy—it then directs the researcher towards new questions, such as what are the effects of the discrepancy between the policy rhetoric and policy reality? How does this discrepancy produce inequities?

The last key difference between the methodologies is related to the commitment to justice. While a mixed method design is often used in combination with critical theory and has an emancipatory intent, it is not a requirement of the methodology itself. Conversely, with its roots in agential realism, a commitment to justice is at the core of diffractive analysis. As Barad (2007) writes in the preface of her book,

Justice, which entails acknowledgment, recognition, and loving attention, is not a state that can be achieved once and for all. There are no solutions; there is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly. The world and its possibilities for becoming are remade in each meeting. How then shall we understand our role in helping constitute who and what come to matter? How to understand what is entailed in the practice of meeting that might help keep the possibility of justice alive in a world that seems to thrive on death? How to be alive to each being's suffering, including those who have died and those not yet born? How to disrupt patterns of thinking that see the past as finished and the future as not ours or only ours?... The yearning for justice, a yearning larger than any individual or sets of individuals, is the driving force behind this work, which is therefore necessarily about our connections and responsibilities to one another—that is, entanglements. (Loc. 82)

In this sense, diffractive analysis is defined by an ongoing commitment to responsibility and justice.

Ultimately, after being stuck at the analysis stage for over two years, agential realism provided me with an ethico-onto-epistemological grounding that resonated with my world view. The associated diffractive analysis offered me a way to focus on the gaps, contradictions, and alignments in my data rather than on how to reconcile them. By re-conceptualizing the data, the policies, theory, and my own positionality as entangled apparatuses, I was able to organize my analysis around the differences that “came to matter” and the phenomena that were produced.

A Critical or Post-Critical Orientation? Or Neither?

Pivoting onto-epistemological frames during the analysis stage was not without consequences—most of which I am feeling now as I am writing the introduction and theory and methods chapters. To be clear, changing onto-epistemological frames did not change *how* I conducted the research; I believe I was always thinking/acting with Barad, even before I knew it. This pivot did, however, change how I understood and communicated what I did, as well as how I will position this work within existing scholarship. In Chapter 2, I provide details of the methods I followed (conventional and diffractive). I also describe how I reconfigured my research question, definition of policy, and ethical considerations to achieve methodological

coherence after the pivot to agential realism. The most significant consequence of shifting onto-epistemological frames, however, was in reconciling how this study is situated in relation to critical theories and Critical Policy Analysis (CPA). This too will be taken up in Chapters 2 and 11.

1.5 – Structure and Significance of Dissertation

In many ways I follow the typical format for a dissertation in the social sciences; however, given the entangled structure of the universe, it was sometimes difficult to find the best starting and ending point of the circles. As such, I could not always explain the issues, patterns, or contexts in a strictly linear way. Sometimes I had to introduce an aspect of a topic and then circle back at a later time to revisit it in a slightly different way. To support the reader through this messiness, I offer a lot of “signposts” throughout the dissertation indicating where the main threads weave in and out of each other (e.g., “see Chapter X”).

After the introduction (Chapter 1), theory and methods chapter (Chapter 2), and background and literature review chapter (Chapter 3), I include seven results and discussion chapters, each organized around a specific “difference that came to matter” observed in the data. In each of these chapters, I describe a diffractive pattern produced by reading data “through” various texts. I also describe configurations of entangled forces (the apparatuses) that produce specific phenomena, as well as the effects of these phenomena. It is important to note that since a diffractive methodology is an iterative approach to research, I sometimes describe additional research questions and their methods within the results and discussion chapters. Brief summaries of the results and discussion chapters are provided below.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 4 is a foundational results and discussion chapter. I sketch the basic contours of IEP and curriculum modification use in the Board and then begin to investigate the difference between the intended recipients of curriculum modifications (Chapter 3) and the prevalence of Modified IEPs in the Board. This is the principal “difference that matters” that forms the foundation of my entire dissertation. The most salient apparatuses that produce this discrepancy are outlined in each of the subsequent chapters; however, a more localized “difference that matters” is also explored in Chapter 4: the contradiction between policies that prevent IEP initiation and policies that ensure their continuation. The forces entangled within this apparatus

include the duality of IEPs, discourses of harm and protection, contradictory policies, and the conflation/aggregation of IEP types. Collectively they produce a phenomenon where it is difficult to obtain the protection of an IEP but simultaneously difficult to end the harm of an IEP. This phenomenon has effects that will be discussed in Chapters 9 and 10.

In Chapter 5, I begin to trace the entanglement of curriculum design, evaluation, pass/fail policies, and IEP policies in the curriculum modification ecosystem. This apparatus produces a key divergence among participants in terms of their understandings of when the curriculum modification policy should be enacted. For some, Modified IEPs were to be initiated after a student received an R¹⁸ on a report card. For others, it was after a C. Forces entangled in this apparatus—what I call the *Apparatus of Mistaken Failures*—include historic and contemporary curriculum, evaluation, pass/fail, and IEP policies, as well as polarized conflicts, policy vacuums, *de facto* policies, and policy ghosts. This apparatus produces a phenomenon, that I provisionally refer to as “inappropriate” Modified IEPs.¹⁹ After describing this phenomenon, I begin to explore its effects using descriptive statistics and multinomial logistic regression analyses demonstrating that racial disproportionality in “inappropriate” Modified IEPs is likely partially produced through biases in grading practices—the topic of Chapter 6.

After demonstrating the significance of report card grades in the initiation of Modified IEPs, in Chapter 6, I begin to trace the apparatus that produces them. Several forces are observed in the apparatus that produces report card grades, including: differing conceptualizations of curriculum and what it meant to pass or fail, a policy vacuum in standards, *de facto* standards, a misalignment between curriculum and evaluation policies, ghosts from a norm-referenced past, and the inseparability of behaviour from academic performance. Through the tracing of this apparatus, I demonstrate that report card grades are not an objective reflection of student ability but rather materially and discursively produced through the apparatus. There is significant variability in grading decisions which contributes to unstable perceptions of need, variability in initiations of Modified IEPs, and ultimately the production of disability. This chapter highlights how the high-stakes decision to modify a student’s curriculum is based on an unstable policy trigger.

¹⁸ A grade of “F” might be more familiar to readers than “R” which is used in Ontario to indicate a failing grade (see Chapter 5).

¹⁹ I leave the term “inappropriate” in quotations throughout the dissertation to signal my skepticism of the term until I revisit it in Chapter 9.

In Chapter 7, I explore another key “difference that makes a difference” that emerged through the focus groups and interviews: the discourse that “good teachers modify” and the simultaneous contradictory discourse that “bad teachers modify.” By reading these contradictory discourses through participants’ lived experiences and Bonnie Honig’s concept of a *dilemmatic space* (Honig, 1996), I demonstrate that Modified IEP decisions are produced by ecological forces and not simply teacher competence or moral character. Forces intra-acting in these *dilemmatic apparatuses*—Honig’s dilemmatic space reconfigured for agential realism—included the social-emotional consequences of grading, conflicting professional standards, student responses to undesired grades, administrator responses to low grades, the Board’s special education procedures, policies of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI), judgements of colleagues’ professional competencies, and discourses of “the good teacher.” In this chapter, I also destabilize discourses of “the bad teacher,” presenting a more agonistic view of teacher actions and inactions. Finally, I demonstrate how these entangled forces intra-act to produce the *Apparatus of the Good Teacher Pipeline* towards curriculum modification enactment.

In Chapter 8, I trace the entangled *Apparatus of Accommodations, Modifications, and Intervention*, by reading policy texts, academic literature, and participants’ comments through each other. This diffractive reading destabilizes the binary framing of accommodations as unambiguously benevolent and intervention as unambiguously harmful, revealing both as sites of competing ableist risks. Forces entangled in this apparatus include a policy vacuum, the absence of opportunities for “intervention” or “remediation,”²⁰ the ghosts of grade retention and social promotion policies, and a hauntology of the medical model of disability in special education. Together, these forces produce the conditions under which Modified IEPs serve multiple purposes beyond their original intent. This analysis points to the need for *supplementary instructional support*—a form of “intervention” or “remediation” re-envisioned through a Critical Disability Studies lens and provided *outside* of the special education department.

In Chapter 9, I read my own prior assumptions through interview and focus group data to destabilize the idea that the decision to initiate a Modified IEP is a choice that can be avoided. In the absence of “intervention,” curriculum modification is shown to be a “no-choice reality” produced by resource scarcity. The forces entangled in this *Apparatus of Access to Intervention*

²⁰ The contested use of these terms will be taken up in Chapter 7.

include: the hauntings of exclusionary practices, class sizes, noise levels, ideologies of inclusion inadequately operationalized through policy, staffing allocations, models of resource support, discourses of DI and UDL, and contradictory IEP policies. The scarcity of access to intervention produces the practice of triaging students based on perceived ability and potential—a practice that disproportionately excludes disabled students from the system that is meant to serve them, while pulling in non-disabled students who acquire the stigma of disability labels in exchange for the support they need. Ultimately, this analysis transformed my prior assumption into two entirely different questions: What is special education? and Who is it for?

In the final results and discussion chapter, Chapter 10, I trace the *Apparatus of Opportunity Hoarding* produced through reading participants' reports of families who aggressively seek IEPs alongside those who adamantly refuse them. Forces intra-acting in this apparatus include the duality of disability and special education, monolithic discourses, the hauntings of eugenics and segregation in special education, disproportionality research, equity and anti-oppression professional learning work, persistent racist ideologies, access to intervention, and differing understandings of Modified IEP purposes. In this chapter, I also read polarized disproportionality debates through each other—binaries of over-representation through under-representation, and discourses of harm and benefit—producing a matrix that illustrates the multiplicity of truths in the field. More significantly, this analysis destabilizes the assumption that proportional representation constitutes equity—demonstrating that reducing over-representation of racialized students can simultaneously produce opportunity hoarding for privileged groups. This finding has direct implications for the Board's equity strategies, which may inadvertently be reproducing the inequities they aim to address.

Collectively, all of the results and discussion chapters demonstrate that the initiation of an IEP is highly dependent on contextual factors, rather than student ability alone. I offer this as one of my concluding thoughts in Chapter 11. Additionally, in the concluding chapter, I summarize my tracings of the ecosystem and revisit the differences between Critical Policy Analysis, Post-Critical Policy and analysis, and play with the idea of an Angonistic Policy Analysis. I conclude with a summary of the contributions of this research and some suggestions of areas for action, discussion, and further exploration.

Significance and Contributions of Research

This dissertation makes several significant empirical, methodological, and theoretical contributions. Empirically, it is among the first studies to disaggregate Accommodation-only and Modified IEPs. This separation is essential in revealing the stratified patterns of access, benefit, and harm that are obscured by aggregated IEP data. By establishing this precedent, I hope to influence future research to do the same. This study also demonstrates that the initiation of a Modified IEP is not an objective reflection of student need but rather produced through a complex apparatus. By using a diffractive analysis, I destabilize many of the taken-for-granted assumptions along the curriculum modification policy chain, including assumptions that there is a stable policy purpose, that there are stable criteria for initiation, that there are objective measures of student performance, and that the policy is triggered by under-performance. By destabilizing assumptions across the entire policy chain, this dissertation reveals that the production of Modified IEPs cannot be attributed to any single cause and therefore, cannot be addressed by any single remedy. By mapping the curriculum modification ecosystem while honouring its complexity, I reveal multiple sites for further exploration, productive dialogue, and policy action. Additionally, this study is among the first to identify patterns of opportunity hoarding within special education. This has significant implications for both disproportionality literature and equity work in the Board. Specifically, my analysis demonstrates that proportional representation of racialized students in special education does not constitute equity, and that current anti-racism efforts to reduce over-representation in the Board are inadvertently producing additional inequities. This highlights an urgent area for action, particularly at the Board level. Finally, this dissertation reveals how the scarcity of resources is producing a phenomenon where disabled students are deprioritized in a system that is meant to serve them. This provokes several important theoretical questions, including what is special education and who is it for?

Theoretically, this dissertation makes contributions in four main areas. First, through diffractive analysis, I destabilize several dominant assumptions in the field of special education, including accommodations as unambiguously benevolent; modifications as appropriately used only as a last resort; bad teacher discourses as accurately accounting for curriculum modification decisions; and proportionality as a sufficient indicator of equity. Destabilizing these assumptions is a significant contribution because collectively, they naturalize practices that are producing harm. Opening these assumptions to scrutiny creates space for more productive dialogue.

Second, this dissertation introduces several new concepts that extend existing frameworks for understanding policy. For example, the concept of a *covert policy* offers new vocabulary for understanding how policy can be secretly mobilized in institutions without accompanying texts that can be used to hold the institution accountable. Third, this dissertation extends Honig's concept of the dilemmatic space by reconfiguring it through agential realism to produce the concept of a dilemmatic apparatus. This reconfiguration decentralizes human agency and highlights the power of non-human forces entangled in what appear to be “decisions,” producing the “no-choice reality” that many educators face. Finally, after recognizing the tension between remediation of schooling difficulties and remediating disability, I argue for a reconceptualization of intervention and remediation through a Critical Disability Studies and Disability Studies in Education framework. This is a significant contribution as it moves the field past a polarized binary of “intervention is harmful” (a disability studies critique) and “intervention is necessary” (education practice), offering a framework that holds both concerns simultaneously and points toward more just and effective practice.

Methodologically, this dissertation is one of the few empirical applications of diffractive analysis. In this dissertation I provide several examples of diffractive moves working in conjunction with conventional analyses, which other researchers working with Baradian frameworks may find useful. This dissertation also demonstrates how diffractive analysis produces different knowledge than critical mixed methods research—not necessarily superior, but knowledge that produces new ways of thinking about issues. These empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions are developed across the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2: Theory and Methods

Agential Realism, Diffractive Analysis, and Policy Ecology for a Post-Critical Policy Analysis

If we hold on to the belief that the world is made of individual entities, it is hard to see how even our best, most well-intentioned calculations for right action can avoid tearing holes in the delicate tissue structure of entanglements that the lifeblood of the world runs through. Intra-acting responsibly as part of the world means taking account of the entangled phenomena that are intrinsic to the world's vitality and being responsive to the possibilities that might help us flourish. Meeting each moment, being alive to the possibilities of becoming, is an ethical call, an invitation that is written into the very matter of all being and becoming. We need to meet the universe halfway, to take responsibility for the role that we play in the world's differential becoming. (Barad, 2007, Loc. 8734)

I set out to investigate: What factors lead to the enactment of curriculum modifications in elementary schools? But where I started was not where I ended up. While the overall research question remained somewhat consistent, the methodology and methods did not. Initially, I proposed a simple Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) study using a traditional qualitative methodology with Ball and colleagues' (2012) enactment theory as my theoretical frame. However, after struggling during the analysis stage, I pivoted. I could not make my data fit neatly into the discrete categories of “material,” “discursive,” and “policy” factors. They were too intra-connected. Unwilling to simplify what I saw as a complex system of relationships, I sought a new paradigm that embraced the messiness.

In the sections that follow, I outline the theories and methods that form the overall methodology of this study. In Section 2.1, I describe the theoretical orientations and frameworks that guide this research and in Section 2.2, I rework several additional components of the methodology in order to achieve methodological coherence with agential realism. In Section 2.3, I outline the datasets and specific methods of analysis. In Section 2.4, I situate myself within the research apparatus and acknowledge some of the constraints of this study. Finally, in Section 2.5, I outline several ethical considerations encountered in this project.

2.1 – Theoretical Orientations and Frameworks

Building on Chapter 1 where I set out agential realism as the ethico-onto-epistemology that guides this methodology and outlined diffractive analysis as the primary mode of analysis, I

now turn to outline the additional orientations, concepts, and methods that have guided this research.

Critical Policy Analysis (CPA)

Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) is a category of research that is attuned to the role of policy in the power dynamics that create or maintain systemic inequities (Levinson et al., 2009; Winton & Tuters, 2015; Young et al., 2024). In an opening chapter to the Journal of Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis's special issue, *Critical Approaches to Education Policy Research*, Young and colleagues (2024) explain,

Critical education policy research has a deep-rooted history, evolving over four decades to challenge traditional positivist approaches. Reimagining epistemology, theory, and methods, scholars pioneered critical policy analysis (CPA), examining power dynamics and contextual influences on educational experiences... Embracing critical theories and methodologies, scholars reveal how language, hierarchy, and privilege construct realities, perpetuate inequities, and reinforce power structures, and they advocate for equitable policy solutions, challenging the status quo to envision a more just educational future. (p. 397)

With its roots in critical theory, CPA presumes that policies are not objective or neutral (Levinson et al., 2009). Instead, policies both reflect and shape social, political and economic ideologies and structures (Levinson et al., 2009). One of the key aims of CPA research is to expose hidden inequities and structural barriers based on race, gender, class, dis/ability and other social markers (Young & Diem, 2018) with a goal of affecting positive change. In a 2014 study of CPA, Diem and colleagues (2014) observed that all of the critical policy scholars surveyed for the project held a common desire to:

make a difference in the lives of students and communities, particularly those that have been historically marginalized by the educational system, through their policy research, to facilitate empowerment, to critique traditional approaches to policy analysis, and, ultimately, to connect their research to practice. (p. 1883)

Additionally, Diem and colleagues (2014) demonstrated that, in general, CPA scholars tended to focus on five key areas of interest:

- 1) the policy process, the use of policy symbols and rhetorical devices, and the difference between policy rhetoric and policy reality
- 2) the origins of policies, including how they emerge, what problems they were intended to solve, and how they reinforce dominant cultures

- 3) the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge in policy creation and implementation, the creation of “winners” and “losers,” and elements of social stratification
- 4) the deeper effects of policy work, such as institutionalization or internalization of dominant cultures
- 5) resistance to processes of domination and oppression, engagement in activism, and use of participatory methods to employ agency within schools

While CPA studies may employ a variety of theoretical frameworks, they are always informed—at least in part—by other strands of critical scholarship that foreground power, equity, and social justice. This present study is particularly oriented towards Disability Studies in Education (DSE) and Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) described below.

Disability Studies in Education (DSE)

The field of DSE grew into being in 1999 when a group of scholars sought to apply concepts from Disability Studies to educational contexts (Gabel, 2005). Now a well-established field, DSE is based on the principles of centring the voices, interests, and agendas of disabled students, presuming competence, rejecting deficit models of disability, and promoting “social justice, equitable and inclusive education opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labeled with disability/disabled people” (Connor, 2019, p. 11). DSE is most known for its critique of special education policies and practices that segregate disabled students (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020; Connor, 2019). Such practices are largely informed by the medical model of disability, which is a narrow, deficit-based ideology that positions disability “as a disease in need of a cure” (Davis, 2017, p. 8).²¹

While a large proportion of DSE scholarship centers around the segregation of disabled students (Baglieri, 2017; Gabel, 2005; Parekh, 2020a, 2022a), the field actually expands well beyond that focus. Several DSE scholars are working to identify and dismantle other forms of ableism in schools (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020; Erevelles, 2005; Parekh, 2022a). Briefly, I understand *ableism* as both the discrimination or prejudice against disabled people, and the

²¹ This should not be conflated with medical treatment itself. Critiques of the model are not necessarily critiquing medical treatments, but rather the belief that all disability is problem to be cured through medical treatment (Withers, 2024).

privileging of non-disabled people.²² As Campbell (2009) has argued, ableism is premised on two core elements: the belief that there is such a thing as “normal,” and the dichotomy of a natural form of humanity versus “the aberrant, the unthinkable, quasi-human hybrid and therefore non-human” (p. 6). A growing body of DSE scholarship seeks to disrupt the multiple forms of ableism in schools. For example, Erevelles (2005) bridges disability studies with curriculum theory in her call to “construct a curriculum that enables the collective interests of all students, such that they can produce oppositional knowledges that will contribute to... social transformation” (p. 423). Parekh (2022a) identifies numerous ways schools perpetuate ableism through awards, rewards, and ability groupings. Richmond (2024) conducts an analysis of disability representation in children’s and adolescents’ literature to inform educators’ critical disability literacy skills. Baglieri and Lalvani (2020) support the development of critical disability pedagogy by suggesting many ways teachers can integrate disability history, pride, and culture into daily lesson plans.

My analysis in this study is also informed by several disability discourses and models of disability that have been established by scholars in DSE’s parent field: Disability Studies. Following many post-structural, post-humanist, and new materialist disability scholars, I resist the firm distinction between impairment and disability. I view impairment as something that cannot be understood independently of the social contexts through which it is responded to, and disability as something that is materially and discursively produced (Flynn, 2017; Goodley et al., 2019). Additionally, I understand disability as an identity—one that individuals may or may not claim in relation to their lived experiences and their encounters with ableism (Linton, 1998b)—and not as a label that is automatically conferred by impairment or by involvement in special education. However, I also recognize that an identity-centred understanding of disability has limits, particularly for children for whom disability may warrant recognition and advocacy before they choose to self-identify.

Importantly, in this study, I maintain a conceptual distinction between disability and involvement with special education. This distinction is empirically grounded in Parekh and Brown’s (2020) research demonstrating that roughly 68% of secondary students involved with special education in a large Ontario school board do not self-identify as having a disability.

²² Sometimes, particularly in the UK context, these concepts of privileging and discriminating are separated into two different terms: ableism and disablism (Withers, 2024).

Conversely, many students who identify as disabled may not be involved with special education. As this study focuses primarily on curriculum modification decisions rather than disability status, I treat disability as relevant where it shapes how students are perceived and responded to institutionally. While disability sometimes shapes teachers' understanding of IEPs and curriculum modification processes, it does so inconsistently. Teachers draw on different and sometimes competing discourses, with medical model assumptions appearing alongside more contextual understandings that vary across individuals and situations. Therefore, in this study, disability is not treated as a stable, pre-given category that the Modified IEP system responds to, but rather as a material-discursive phenomenon that is contextually produced, and, in turn, partially and unevenly produces institutional decisions.

Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit)

Dis/ability Critical Race Theory, or “DisCrit” as it is more commonly called, is an intersectional theory that simultaneously engages Disability Studies (DS) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Annamma et al., 2013b). In response to the predominant centering of whiteness in Disability Studies, Subini Annamma developed the term *DisCrit* in order to highlight the inseparability of perceptions of race and ability (Annamma et al., 2016). Quoted at length, they write:

Building on the foundations of Connor and Ferri (along with many other scholars including those listed above) within my own work, I sought to expand the conversation to build a framework that was responsive to the social location of the students of color with disabilities with whom I had worked as an educator. These students, ‘forged in the crucibles of difference’ (Lorde, 2007, p. 112), were brilliant yet floundering in schools and were seemingly being ignored by the academy at large... In sum, this book [and the theory it outlines] grew out of our belief in the potential for DisCrit to expand our capacity as scholars to analyze some of the most entrenched educational inequities from an intersectional lens. (Annamma et al., 2016)

Rather than foregrounding particular social dimensions at the expense of others, DisCrit centers a multidimensional view of identity and focuses how racism and ableism circulate intra-dependently (Annamma et al., 2013b). Through this lens, DisCrit scholars have been able to examine how “racism and ableism are woven together in educational contexts through policies, practices, curricula, and interactions that (re)produce narrow expectations of normalcy to uphold White, nondisabled norms as most desirable and marginalize those perceived as different” (Hancock et al., 2021, p. 46). Specifically, several scholars have examined the interactions of race and ability in school disciplinary practices and the school to prison pipeline (Adams &

Erevelles, 2016; Broderick & Leonardo, 2016), notions of early childhood development (Hancock et al., 2021), and special education identifications, placements, and practices (Artiles, 2011, 2022; Artiles et al., 2016; Erevelles et al., 2005; Ferri & Connor, 2005a, 2005b, 2010; Fish, 2017; D. K. Reid & Knight, 2006; Theoharis & Causton, 2016; Waitoller et al., 2010).

Throughout this dissertation, I remain oriented to DSE, DisCrit, and CPA, drawing from their concepts to identify and trace how racism and ableism move through the intra-connected layers of the curriculum modification policy ecology. However, my onto-epistemological pivot towards agential realism raises questions whether this study should be *categorized* as a CPA study. While my scholarship remains oriented to the contributions of CPA—particularly its commitment to revealing the dynamics of power, exposing systems of inequality, directing policy research towards questions of justice, and envisioning liberatory futures (Lather, 1993)—two tensions, both concerning what it means to be “critical,” have led me to echo calls to recognize a *post-critical* turn within policy analysis.

What Does it Mean to be “Critical”?

As Leonardo (2013) explains, “critical” can mean many things. It can mean urgent, necessary, and essential, as in a critical need to make a change. It can mean to critique, as in to find fault or challenge ideologies, power, and oppression. It can mean to employ critical thinking skills during analysis. It can also refer to engaging with critical reason—an academic tradition rooted in the works of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, which holds that truth can be pursued through reason, as long as that reason remains self-reflexive and aware of the forces of power that shape it (Crotty, 1998; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; Thompson, 2017).

Using critical reason, scholars of the Frankfurt school such as Habermas, Adorno, and Horkheimer, as well as many who have followed, developed social theories with emancipatory intent, forming what has since become a broad umbrella of critical theory (Crotty, 1998; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). As Thompson (2017) explains,

The concept of a critical theory of society maintains that any valid, true form of knowledge about society and its products is one that is aware not only of the object of consciousness and its various dynamics, but also of the subjective factors of cognition that determine the knowledge of that object. A critical theory of society is therefore set with the task of uncovering the social conditions under which knowledge about itself is articulated, since the way we comprehend the objective world is related to the ways we conceive of ourselves. (p. 2)

In other words, classical critical theorists maintain a strong commitment to human reason as the means through which truth, freedom, and equity can be achieved, as long as knowledge is constructed with an awareness of the forces that have influenced it. Unlike positivists who claim that the subject is capable of observing the objective truth by virtue of being neutral conduits of knowledge—what Haraway (1988) calls “the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (p. 581)—many critical theorists position the subject and object as inseparable, but claim that the subject can step outside or “transcend” the fog to observe the object as long as they identify and acknowledge the powers of discourse, ideology, and hegemony that produce it (e.g., standpoint theory). As Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) explain:

As creatures of the world, we are oriented to it in a way that prevents us from grounding our theories amid perspectives outside of it. Thus, whether we like it or not, we are all destined as interpreters to analyze from within its boundaries amid blinders. Within these limitations, however, the interpretations emerging from the hermeneutic process can still move us to new levels of understanding, appreciations that allow us to “live our way” into an experience described to us. Despite the impediments of context, hermeneutical researchers can *transcend* the inadequacies of thin descriptions of decontextualized facts and produce thick descriptions of social texts characterized by the contexts of their production, the intentions of their producers, and the meanings mobilized in the processes of their construction. (p. 294, *emphasis added*)

From an ontological perspective, many have argued that these claims are subject to the same crucial pitfalls of positivism and do not successfully “transcend” the problem of the subject-object divide (Crotty, 1998; Ellsworth, 2010; D. Haraway, 1988; Lather, 1993).

Although many critical theorists of today retain the use of “critical” in the sense of challenging power and oppression, most theories commonly recognized as contemporary critical theory have departed from the classical critical theory tradition and have diversified their ontological and epistemological assumptions. For example, scholarship in CRT, CDT, and CPA often draw on the works of Foucault, Derrida, and Butler—scholars closely associated with poststructuralist ontology and epistemology (Ball et al., 2012; Campbell, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Erevelles, 2005), where the realities are understood as produced through language, discourse, and power relations (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Though less common, there are also applications of post-humanist, decolonial, and new materialist epistemologies employed within these “critical” theories (Flynn & Feely, 2023; Goodley, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2003), though many scholars in those respective methodological fields would distance themselves from a “critical” characterization (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

These departures from reason-based epistemology have not been without heated critique from classical critical theorists who remain staunchly dedicated to objectivity and reason. For example, Thompson (2017) laments:

much of what passes for critical theory today is associated with anything that seems to be “critical” of culture and society. Hence, strands of thought such as feminism, deconstruction, and postcolonialism, among others, have been crowded under the banner of critical theory. But to do this is to commit an error about what critical theory—indeed, about what critique—actually is. To be sure, much of *this aberrant use of the term* stems from the destructive impulse of postmodernism and its *project of destroying reason* as a privileged position from which to judge and to understand power, domination, freedom, and human progress as well as the pseudo-political radicalism of academics alienated from real politics. Despite what many have surmised, critical theory was always preoccupied with the normative validity of human progress, by the *need to defend the political and cultural values of the Enlightenment* and to expand the sphere of human emancipation through reasoned, rational consciousness, and activity. (p. 2, *emphasis added*)

Inversely, a similar critique is emerging from *within* critical policy scholarship where some are questioning the ontological and epistemological roots and legacies of the field. Scheurich (2023), for example, urges “critical” scholars to pause and deconstruct what it means to be “critical” and to “critique” as they too can be rooted in the very logics we seek to dismantle. He goes on to invoke Lorde’s famous phrase: “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” (p. 100). Scheurich (2023) then asks:

Does this, then, point us beyond critique and critical, as tools of the master? Can critique and critical only assist us in temporarily beating the civilizational model at its (white heterosexual male) own game? Will critique and critical—which are ultimately encapsulated within the colonialist, white supremacist, heteronormative, male supremacist civilizational model—only take us so far, maybe to resistance and survival, but not thrival or “genuine change?” Is [Lorde] suggesting that it is the making of a common cause, the relationality, of the dispossessed that lead beyond the master’s tools of critical and critique to thrival, to genuine change? I think she is. I think we should listen. (p. 100)

Although many contemporary critical theories have attempted to move away from these roots, traces of Enlightenment thinking remain evident in the pervasive binary logics of oppressor/oppressed, human/not human, and right/wrong that continue to shape critical scholarship—not to mention in the sometimes habitual polarized stances that “demonizes some ‘Other’ and positions itself as innocent” (Lather, 2017, p. 106).

In addition to the onto-epistemological incompatibilities of agential realism with classical critical theory, my second concern with categorizing this project as “critical” relates to my wariness of the binaries and the polarization that can accompany critique. For some critical theorists, this is a point of pride. As Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) write,

Some 70 years after its development in Frankfurt, Germany, critical theory retains its ability to disrupt and challenge the status quo. In the process, it elicits highly charged emotions of all types—*fierce loyalty* from its proponents, *vehement hostility* from its detractors. Such vibrantly polar reactions indicate at the very least that critical theory still matters. *We can be against critical theory or for it*, but, especially at the present historical juncture, we cannot be without it. Indeed, qualitative research that frames its purpose in the context of critical theoretical concerns still produces, in our view, *undeniably dangerous knowledge*, the kind of information and insight that *upsets institutions* and *threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth*. (p. 286, *emphases added*)

While disruption of the status quo is imperative, I worry that the revolutionary language sometimes used in critical scholarship can result in antagonism and polarization that ultimately undermines the emancipatory goals of critical research. I also wonder if the very label of “critical” scholarship can sometimes foreclose dialogue before it is even engaged with. “Critical” has become an ideological marker that signals an oppositional stance—one that can close off ambiguity, tension, and agonistic engagement. Barad, too, shares this concern and offers diffractive methodology as an alternative to critique. As Bozalek and Zembylasb (2017) explain, Barad finds critique to be:

potentially epistemologically damaging process of distancing, othering and putting others down (Juelskjær & schwennesen, 2012). A diffractive methodology in contrast, is not setting up one approach/text/discipline against another but rather a detailed, attentive and careful reading the ideas of one through another, leading to more generative ‘inventive provocations’ (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 50) and the possibility of a true transdisciplinarity rather than interdisciplinarity.

From this perspective, I believe that this present research might better categorized as what Lather (2017) calls a “post-critical” orientation to policy analysis. As I write this, I do not yet have a clear idea of how the idea of “post-critical” has evolved after Lather’s framing. Nor do I yet know how I may have taken it up in this project. However, it is clear to me that while many aspects of CPA remain central to this dissertation, I suspect this project may be better described as a “post-critical policy analysis” or perhaps simply as “policy analysis” without any categorization. This is not to suggest that the theories guiding this research are indifferent to addressing inequities and pursuing justice; as described above, ethics and anti-oppression are

inextricably part of agential realism and diffractive analysis. Rather, the departure is driven by my commitments to relational ontology and modes of scholarly engagement that resist polarization. These tensions will be revisited in Chapter 11 with my concluding thoughts on this project.

2.2 – Achieving Methodological Coherence

Outlined below are the reworkings of several key components of my methodology: First, the research questions, then the theoretical frameworks, and finally, my position within the research. It is my hope that through these reworkings, I achieve methodological coherence. It is important to acknowledge that many of the understandings articulated here are retrospective. In practice, my analytic process was iterative, and I came to recognize and name many of these practices during the writing process. In other words, I came to know what I was doing through “the doing,” which, I think, is in line with Barad’s insistence that knowing and being are inseparable (Barad, 1996, 2007).

Reframing My Research Questions

I originally set out to investigate: What factors (i.e. material, discursive, and interpretive) lead to the enactment of curriculum modifications? In retrospect, I can see how this question is situated within a critical qualitative tradition and not compatible with an agential realist stance. In this original question, I positioned factors as separate entities, I assumed cause and effect, and I centered the human in the choice to enact policy. In effort to adjust the research question to align with the agential realist framework, my guiding question is more appropriately articulated as: How are enactments of the curriculum modification policy produced? What configurations of institutional conditions (apparatuses) make these enactments possible? What effects do these apparatuses generate? This rearticulation recognizes that apparatuses do not have discrete boundaries, acknowledges the inseparability of material-discursive entities, decentres human agency to emphasize the agency of non-human forces, and emphasises how the phenomenon—enactments of the curriculum modification policy—is produced through intra-actions.

Moving from Enactment Theory to Policy Ecology

As stated earlier, I started this project using *enactment theory* as the theoretical frame which influenced my initial research questions, my interview questions, and how I coded the qualitative data.

Enactment Theory

Enactment theory originated from Stephen Ball, Meg Maguire, and Annette Braun's (2012) grounded theory research examining how four British secondary schools enacted three different education policies. Based on their findings, they developed enactment theory as a starting point or "a very tentative synthesis or model" (p. 17) for future research into how teachers enact policy. According to Ball and colleagues (2012) a new theory about policy enactment was necessary because of traditional policy analysis' limited conceptualization of implementation. In traditional policy analysis, policy implementation is rooted in rational-choice theory and positioned as individual's choice based on "personal interest or utility maximization" (p. 3). In contrast, critical policy analysts recognize that there are many external factors that determine how (and to some extent, whether or not) actors enact policies (Young & Diem, 2018).

According to Ball et al. (2012) enactment theory is significantly more complex than implementation theory. It "interweaves three constituent facets of policy work and the policy process – *the material*, *the interpretive*, and *the discursive*. None of [which] is on its own sufficient to capture, understand and represent enactment; all are necessary" (p. 14). These three facets are described below.

The Interpretive Context. In contrast to traditional policy analysis' concept of translation, enactment theory's concept of interpretation brings more nuance and technology to the sensemaking process. Translation, according to Ball and colleagues (2012), refers to an initial reading of a policy text. Interpretation, on the other hand, refers to a process more closely related to practice. It includes, "making institutional texts and putting those texts into action, literally 'enacting' policy using tactics which include talk, meetings, plans, events, 'learning walks'" and more (p. 45). In other words, interpretation encompasses all the communication, promotion, and training around a particular policy. Ball and colleagues (2012) also provide a typology of different policy actors in the interpretation process. Using a variety of tropes from the "policy enthusiast" to the "policy critics" and many others in between, the concept of policy translation captures even the "mundane social interactions" (p. 2) between staff members.

The Material Context. Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) implore policy researchers to "take context seriously" (p. 19). They name several "materials" that create context for policy enactment. The authors explicitly include: the situated context (e.g., locale, school history, school community, etc.); professional cultures (e.g., values, teacher commitments, experience, etc.);

material contexts (e.g., staffing, budget, buildings, technology, infrastructure, etc.); and external contexts (e.g., pressures from broader context, degree and quality of support, legal requirements, etc.). Additionally, although not explicitly mentioned in the list of material factors, time and energy are frequently discussed in the book.

The Discursive Context. The discursive context is the third key facet of enactment theory. As Ball and colleagues (2012) argue,

The teachers and the students who embody and make up the school are caught in a complex web of policy discourses through which they are incited to ‘do’ the good school and ‘be’ the good teacher and ‘perform’ the good student. These are exclusionary and selective discourses; only certain ‘goods’ are sensible or legitimate. Other versions of the good school become unthinkable or doable, and are consigned to the ‘field of memory.’ (p. 135)

Overall, enactment theory was a helpful starting point. It informed my interview and focus group questions, provided structure for coding the data, and it helped me understand the complexity of enactment. However, as I will elaborate on in Section 2.3, I struggled to make it work as a theoretical framework through the coding, analysis, and writing stages while I was still developing my ability to work with diffractive analysis. I simply could not separate the material, discursive, and interpretive factors into those discrete categories—separations that Barad (2007) argues are impossible, and, ironically, separations that I think Ball and colleagues (2012) themselves struggled with—an observation that I will examine more closely in Chapter 11.

Furthermore, I was encountering forces in the apparatuses such as voids, movements, tensions, polarizations, dilemmas, and ghosts, that I was intuitively “seeing” in a relational system of co-constitutive forces—a metaphoric ecosystem. At this critical juncture in my project, one of my committee members, Dr Winton, guided me towards *Policy Ecology* and the work of Weaver-Hightower (2008).

Policy Ecology

As Weaver-Hightower (2008) explains,

the ecology metaphor helps us to conceptualize policy processes as complex, interdependent, and intensely political... bringing new understandings and attention to often overlooked aspects of policy creation and implementation... it not only allows for but actually incorporates the messy workings of widely varying power relations, along with the forces of history, culture, economics, and social change. (p. 158)

While Ball and colleagues’ (2012) enactment theory is also oriented towards a kind of relational, process-focused thinking; however, there are key differences between the frameworks that made

policy ecology easier to put in conversation with agential realism and diffractive methodology at the time. First, policy ecology offers a metaphorical “space” where anything can be added to the system without fitting them into predetermined categories. This made it easier to organize more abstract forces like tensions, flows, voids, dilemmas, and perceptions within the post-structural orientation of policy ecology than in enactment theory. Second, whereas enactment theory emphasizes the factors that lead to the enactment of a policy, policy ecology attends to the relationships among the factors. The focus on *inter*-actions was a helpful stepping stone towards the focus on *intra*-actions that agential realism requires. Finally, as Weaver-Hightower (2008) explains, “the ecology metaphor’s usefulness lies in its ability to extend analysis further” (p. 155). This strength became particularly important as I came to observe that the enactment of the curriculum modification policy could not be disentangled from the overall policy process. With its extensions beyond enactment, I found the policy ecology framework to be more forgiving of the boundless orientation of agential realism and with the sheer breadth of topics this research ultimately examined.

That said, I acknowledge that I could have continued with enactment theory and reworked its ontology to align with agential realism had I had the capacity to do so at the time. Although I pivoted towards policy ecology, I continued to use “enactment” as an essential concept throughout this dissertation. In Chapter 11, I return to enactment theory to examine what the findings of this study reveal about its ontological commitments, and what an agential realist reworking of the framework would require.

Reworking Policy Ecology for Agential Realism

As a critical post-structuralist framework (Weaver-Hightower, 2008), policy ecology has a lot in common with agential realism. They both decenter the human, acknowledge agency of the non-human, follow a relational ontology, reject rigid boundaries, focus on relationships between entities, and assume an always-changing dynamic. However, there are key aspects of Weaver-Hightower’s presentation of policy ecology that must be reconciled for it to be compatible with the overall methodology of this study.

First, Weaver-Hightower positions elements of the ecosystem as separate entities that interact, whereas Barad (1996) would argue that entities do not pre-exist their interactions. As explained in Chapter 1, Barad conceptualizes entities as phenomena that are produced through entangled intra-acting forces (apparatuses). This distinction has implications for the second

difference to be reconciled: the standpoint of the researcher. For a critical scholar such as Weaver-Hightower, the researcher examines the phenomena from a particular standpoint, informed by lived-experiences and theoretical commitments. By contrast, Barad (2007) insists that the researcher is part of the phenomena being examined as they are entangled with all of the other apparatuses that produce it. Hence, she stresses the ethics of knowledge production. With these divergences in mind, I employ a theoretical frame of policy ecology read through Barad (2007), where apparatuses, including me as the researcher, intra-act and produce knowledge.

Having established the theoretical framework through which I approach policy in this study, I now must define what I mean by policy itself, and what policy becomes when understood through agential realism.

What is Policy? Understanding Policy as a Baradian Apparatus

In a cornerstone essay, Ball (1993) provided two theories about policy, arguing that policy analysis needed a “toolbox of diverse concepts and theories” (p. 43). He explains,

One of the conceptual problems currently lurking within much policy research and policy sociology is that more often than not analysts fail to define conceptually what they mean by policy. The meaning of policy is taken for granted and theoretical and epistemological dry rot is built into the analytical structures they build. It is not difficult to find the term policy being used to describe very different ‘things’ at different points in the same study. For me, much rests on the meaning or possible meanings that we give to policy; it affects ‘how’ we research and how we interpret what we find. (p. 43)

The two theories offered in Ball’s chapter are *policy as text* and *policy as discourse*, though he does not frame them as mutually exclusive. Rather, he positions policy as both text *and* discourse, arguing that they are implicit in one another. Briefly, policy as text draws from reader response theory and refers to a physical representation of policies (“policy artifacts”) that are encoded, decoded, and interpreted in complex ways (Ball, 1993). With policy as discourse, Ball draws on Foucault to describe the way in which “policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercise power through a production of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’, as discourses... Discourses are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority” (p. 48). In this sense, policy is not just about the documents, but also a discursive formation that actively produces meaning and relations of power (Ball, 1993). This is, admittedly, very close to how I understand policy, but with a key ontological difference: While Ball’s framework remains primarily discursive, agential realism refuses to separate the material from the discursive, treating policy as constituted through both simultaneously.

In reading Ball's (1993) policy as text, policy ensembles, and policy as discourse with Barad (2007), I structure my research around an understanding of policy as a Baradian apparatus. Through putting Foucault's work in conversation with Bohr's, Barad (2007) reconfigures Foucault's concept of *dispositif* (often translated as "apparatus") for agential realism, bridging the Cartesian divide between the material and discursive. She writes,

Crucial to understanding the workings of power is an understanding of the nature of power in the fullness of its materiality. To restrict power's productivity to the limited domain of the social... is to cheat matter out of the fullness of its capacity. How might we understand not only how human bodily contours are constituted through psychic processes but also how even the very atoms that make up the biological body come to matter, and more generally how matter makes itself felt? (Loc. 1557)

This means that for Barad, matter is not a passive backdrop to discursive processes. It is actively constitutive of them. While both Foucault and Barad use "apparatus" to mean a cluster or group of elements, Barad (2007) rejects the idea that the entities within them pre-exist their relationships. Instead, she argues that phenomena are produced through apparatuses, which close the Cartesian split between the material and discursive, as well as the subject and the object.

When applied to the concept of policy, this means that policy, understood as a Baradian apparatus, is not a fixed entity but rather a product of the intra-acting forces—including everything Ball describes as policy as text and policy as discourse, as well as actors, histories, translations, interpretations, contexts, and enactments themselves. Crucially, policy is configured and reconfigured every time it is enacted. In other words, policies are produced through their enactment—forming and reforming in each unique context, and therefore, a policy ecology, understood through agential realism, *is* the policy, and a diffractive analysis is the study of its production.

While enactment theory also positions policy as context-specific and locally produced, it stops short of theorizing the ontological implications. Agential realism makes the ontological assumptions explicit, whereas enactment theory leaves them more implicit: that policy and its enactment are mutually constitutive. In other words, they each produce the other.

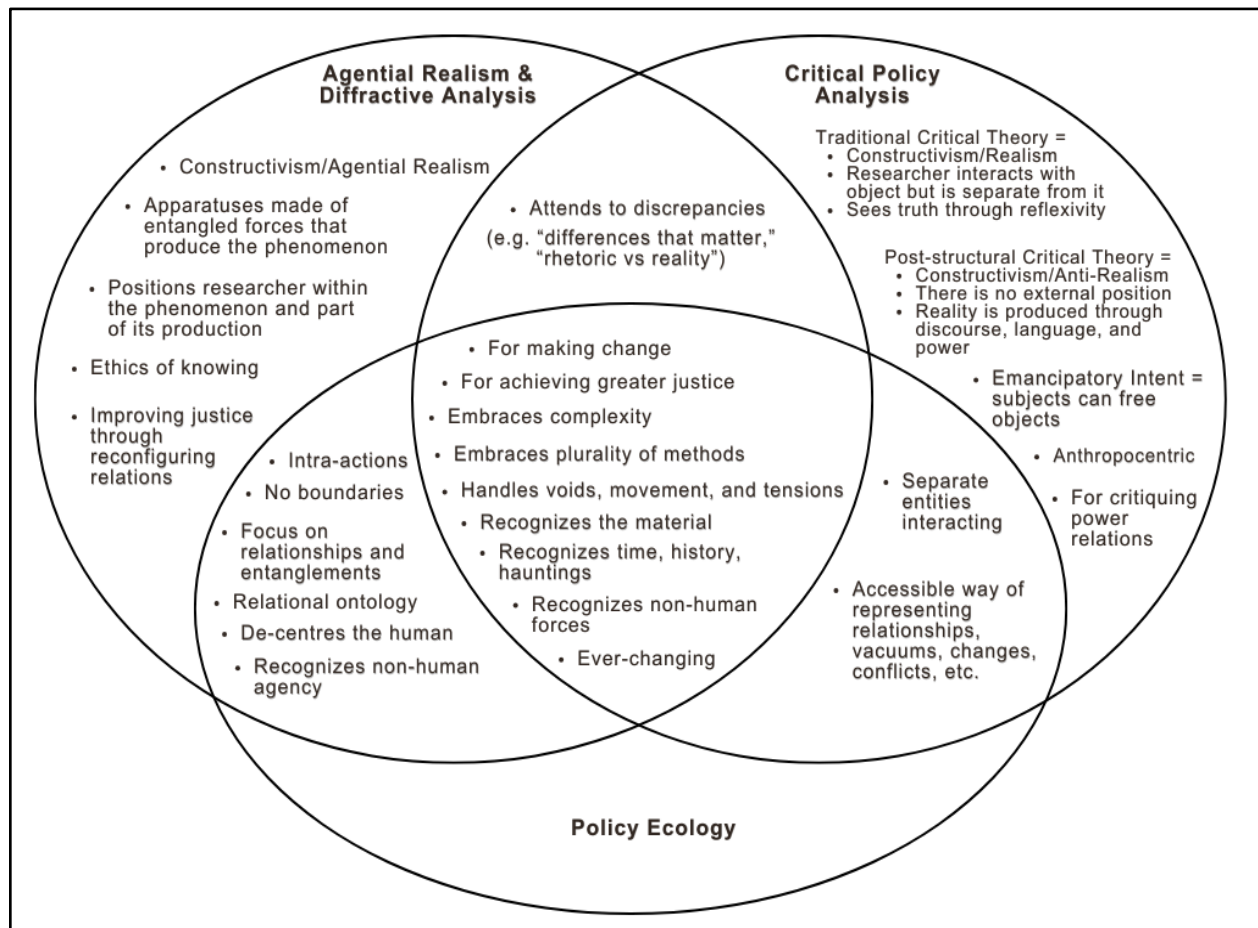
Achieving Methodological Coherence

As Diem and colleagues (2019) remind us, "the ability to analyze educational policies through multi-theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches, results in policy analyses that have more depth and breadth (p. 7). By reconciling the issues outlined above, I hope to have achieved

methodological coherence. Or at least, almost. Still outstanding is the question of how this research should be positioned in relation to CPA. Despite the shared commitments to making change and seeking justice (Figure 2.1), I wonder if CPA's emphasis on critique may be in tension with agential realism's insistence on an entangled, relational nature of causality, and may inadvertently foreclose the productive dialogue needed for effective change. These are questions that I will continue to wrestle with throughout the manuscript and will address in Chapter 11.

Figure 2.1

Convergences & Divergences: Agential Realism, Policy Ecology, and Critical Policy Analysis



Note. A Venn diagram summarizing the convergences and divergences of Agential Realism, Policy Ecology, and Critical Policy Analysis

2.3 – Datasets and Methods

I will admit, I *may* have collected *too much* data. But, as feminist methodologist Wanda Pillow (2023) argues, “despite calls for an end to data, I suggest that post-present times require

data proliferations and inquiry as thick, complex, rich theoretical, methodological, policy, and praxis entanglements” (p. 184) to support reimagined change.

As a diffractive analysis calls for reading analyses “through” one another, I outline each of the component analyses below. I have organized this section so that each dataset is described in conjunction with their methods of analysis.

Location

The study took place in a large, urban, public school board in Ontario. It is highly diverse and one of the largest school systems in North America. The Board has collected extensive demographic and experiential data for the purpose of critical examination of their own policies and practices since 1970 (Ellis, 2019). Census data is merged with administrative data, which has enabled research into program efficacy, distribution of academic advantages, and structural mechanisms of inequality within the Board (Yau et al., 2014).

Although most of the data in this study came directly from the Board, local experiences cannot be separated from their broader influences. For this reason, I zoom in and out of spatial contexts, including single classrooms, individual schools, the Board, the province of Ontario, and North America more generally. I also zoom in and out of time periods in order to provide necessary historic context for the conflicts, policies, and discourses involved in the ecosystem.

While this study examines how policy enactment is produced in this particular board, the dissonance between policy texts and their enactment is not unique to this context but characteristic of policy work in general.

Interview and Focus Group Data

Participants

Using purposive “sampling”²³ (Creswell & Poth, 2016), I recruited four kinds of participants from the Board through word of mouth, emails distributed by the special education department, and a local teachers Facebook group. I included:

²³ I agree with Braun and Clarke who argue that the term “sample” has underlying positivist assumptions because it implies that the data ‘sample’ will reflect the total population. I use it here to indicate that I was specifically looking for teachers who were undergoing (or had recently undergone) the process of initiating a Modified IEP for a particular student.

- 10 elementary classroom teachers who were undergoing the process of initiating a Modified IEP for a student in their class (or who had recently gone through the process).
- Eight School-based Special Education Leaders²⁴ (hereafter called SSEL). Every elementary school in the Board has a SSEL—an unpaid, voluntary leadership role that is performed in addition to their regular teaching duties. In most cases the SSEL is also the resource support teacher (Toronto District School Board, 2024b, p. 34).
- Five administrators—two were principals and three were vice-principals
- Three centrally assigned special education consultants, now called “Inclusion Consultants”

In total, there were 26 participants. Only one participant was previously known to me but felt comfortable participating in the study. All participants completed a pre-interview survey indicating their social-demographic information and their experience level, and completed the informed consent documents.

Interviews and Focus Groups

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the ten teacher participants. A “semi-structured” approach was appropriate as it allowed me to gain “an in-depth exploration of each participant’s story, not a uniformly structured account” (Braun & Clarke, 2022a, p. 13). Following Creswell and Poth (2016) I planned 5-10 interview questions in advance (Appendix A) but also developed others during the interviews. Participants in other roles (i.e., the SSELS, administrators, and inclusion consultants) joined focus groups according to their role. The focus group format was chosen for participants in these roles in order to facilitate a greater number of participants and perspectives. Unlike group interviews, the focus group format allowed me to pay closer attention to the interactions, agreements, and disagreements between participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This was particularly helpful for a diffractive analysis as one of the key “difference[s] that matters” emerged between participants in one of the focus group sessions (Chapter 5). I stopped recruiting participants for the interviews and focus groups after reaching *theoretical sufficiency*—the point at which the researcher feels they have sufficient depth of understanding of the topic to defend their interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). In total, I

²⁴ The title of this position has been changed to help protect the identity of the Board.

facilitated six focus groups: three for SSEs, two for administrators, and one for inclusion consultants. Focus group questions are presented in Appendix A. All interview and focus group sessions were approximately 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted over Zoom in April and May of 2023.

Transcription

The ten interviews and six focus group sessions were recorded in Zoom and then transcribed by either me or a third-party transcription company depending on participants' consent. As Bucholtz (2000) argues, transcription is inherently subjective and political as it involves countless decisions of what to include or exclude. Meaning cannot be represented by words alone—pauses, grunts, sighs, and vocalizations all communicate meaning (Bucholtz, 2000). For this reason, I chose to do verbatim transcriptions to remain as close to the data as possible (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016). The drawback of verbatim transcription is that it is more difficult to read. I therefore coded and analysed the verbatim transcripts. However, most participant quotes in this dissertation are presented in an edited or *unnaturalized* format, as Bucholtz (2000) calls it, to be more accessible for readers.

Coding and Analysis

I conducted at least three rounds of coding of the interview and focus group data. Although I had created verbatim transcriptions, I found it easier to code transcripts in sync with the actual recordings of the sessions, which provided a much richer format for reviewing the content (Price & Kerschbaum, 2016). Following Kennedy (2018), I used an abductive approach to coding, which means I began with some *a priori* codes based on Ball and colleagues' (2012) enactment theory (i.e., “policy context,” “discursive context,” and “material context” further divided into “student context,” “classroom context,” and policy actor typologies), but also *posteriori* codes that emerged as the analysis progressed. In other words, I moved iteratively between enactment theory and the data in order to detect patterns, similarities, and differences. I reviewed each interview or focus group session a minimum of three times—first with the aim of becoming familiar with the data, then through multiple rounds of coding. Each time, I reviewed the sessions in a different order to “disrupt what can become a familiar flow” (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p. 71).

Given that enactment theory is a tripartite theory (Ball et al., 2012) involving policies, discourses, and material factors, I planned to conduct two separate analyses of the data: a

reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2022b) and what Bischooping and Gazso (2016) call a “garden variety” discourse analysis. Unlike specific traditions of discourse analysis such as Norman Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (note the uppercase letters), which focuses on the power and political implications of language, or Foucauldian discourse analysis, which focuses on how discourses construct what counts as truth or legitimate knowledge, “garden variety” discourse analysis refers to research examining discourse more broadly blending several theoretical or methodological traditions (Bischooping & Gazso, 2016). However, as explained above, I ran into difficulties at this stage of data analysis—coincidentally, the very stage that Patti Lather calls “the ‘black hole’ of qualitative research” (in St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 715). While I was able to cover the transcripts in hundreds of codes,²⁵ I found it impossible to separate the material factors from discursive factors, which stalled my progress until I shifted my onto-epistemological and theoretical frameworks.

Post-Coding Analysis

Like MacLure, I “enjoy that part of the research process that involves poring over the data, annotating, describing, linking, bringing theory to bear, recalling what others have written, and seeing things from different angles” (in St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 715). However, I really struggled to get these “codes” to fit into discrete representational categories, or “themes,” in a way that did justice to the overall picture I was observing. In retrospect, I think I was struggling to fit into an ontology that was not compatible with my world view. As St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) write,

The ontologies and epistemologies that enable one to code data as described above are, of course, unthinkable in the “posts” (e.g., post-positivism, post-subjective, posthumanism, post-modernism, post-structuralism, postfoundationalism, post-empiricism/materialism) that use different ontologies that describe the world as unstable and becoming. (p. 716)

As a post-structural, post-humanist theory, agential realism and its diffractive analysis do not call for strict coding or analytic procedures. As Mazzei (2014) describes,

A diffractive analysis is not a reduction of data using a series of concepts, much like coding would require. Rather, it takes a rhizomatic (rather than hierarchical and linear shape) form that leads in different directions and keeps analysis and knowledge production on the move. (p. 23)

²⁵ As it turns out, I am what Saldaña (2021) calls a “splitter” (p. 34)—someone who creates many specific, more granular codes rather than a “lumper” who tends to create fewer broad categories. Both tendencies present their own challenges during analysis.

Within this stance, analysis is not understood as something emerging from codes, but rather occurring “everywhere and all the time” (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 717). St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) refer to this process of analysis as *post-coding analysis*.²⁶ They write,

Post-coding analysis, then, can be thought as non-technique and non-method that is always in a process of becoming as theories interlink, intensify, and increase territory...So the work of post-coding analysis cannot be neat, tidy, and contained. Furthermore, it cannot be easily explained either during or after analysis. It certainly cannot be replicated because it is emergent and experimental. In addition, its space–time cannot be secured in the traditional linear “process” trajectory of data collection>analysis>representation. (p. 717)

This does not mean that I disregarded all of my codes—the process of coding was actually quite helpful in structuring my initial engagement with the data and facilitating my familiarization with it. However, I did not follow a standard technical process for abstracting theory from the codes. The process was much more organic, iterative, and focused on entry points into further diffractive readings of the data.

Altogether, data from the interview and focus group sessions were held in tension with other data sources to produce the overall findings of this study.

Policy Artifacts

Though my understanding of “policy” extends well beyond the texts themselves (Section 2.2), in this section, I describe the specific artifacts and micro technologies used in my analysis.

Policy Texts and Technologies

In total, over 50 policy texts were examined, originating from all 13 Canadian provinces and territories, as well as from a few American states (New York, California, and Texas). The examined time periods range from the Ontario Schools Act in 1871, to memos released in 2025. A wide variety of artifacts were examined, including special education policies, IEP policies, assessment and evaluation policies, and curriculum documents (which I understand as policy). Additionally, legal texts such as acts, bills, statutes, and regulations were examined, as well as board-level memos, policy & program memorandums (PPMs), reports, and special education plans. Also considered policy artifacts—or as Ball and colleagues (2012) call them *micro-technologies*—are material resources that help facilitate the interpretation of policy such as

²⁶ In this case, I believe ‘post’ refers to an era *after* the hegemonic use of coding in qualitative analysis, not the analysis that occurs after one has coded their data (although in my case, it could refer to both).

resource guides, and a professional development TV series produced by TV Ontario. These serve as policy “meaning makers and controls of meanings” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 121).

Analysis

The collection and examination of policy artifacts was perhaps the most organic part of this study. Over the course of my research, I sought policy texts for three different purposes: to provide geographic context, to situate it in the historic context, and to diffract policy artifacts with the broader understandings of the curriculum modification policy. While I do not claim to have undergone a formal method of analysis of the policy artifacts, much of what I did could be described that way. I therefore loosely describe my three approaches to analysing policy artifacts as content analysis, comparative policy analysis, and policy history.

Content Analysis. I used this approach to help me trace the role of policy-as-text relative to policy-as-discourse in the overall enactment of the policy. In other words, I wanted to check—or diffract—participants’ claims about what the policy said with the artifacts themselves. I therefore located all policy artifacts mentioned by participants and situated them within the policy ecosystem.

Comparative Policy Analysis. To provide context for the study and to investigate its potential significance, I investigated the geographic scope of the policy problem, asking *where and how are curriculum modifications used in Canada?* To answer this question, I collected over 20 policy documents from the 13 provinces and territories found on Ministry of Education websites. Then I charted each jurisdiction’s definitions of accommodation and modification, documented how modifications are used, and noted any additional guidelines for the use of curriculum modifications and IEPs. This process could be considered a “comparative policy content analysis” (Geva-May et al., 2018; Tremblay & Belley, 2017), though a fairly superficial one at that. The results of this analysis are presented in Chapter 3.

Policy History. Several scholars have stressed the importance of situating contemporary policy issues withing their historic contexts (Artiles, 2022; Ball et al., 2012; Ellis, 2019; Gale, 2001). As Gale (2001) writes, “Indeed, all sociology worthy of the name is ‘historical sociology’” (p. 383). As such, I made an effort to trace patterns of change between current policy documents and those that preceded them. Fortunately, most (if not all) Ontario education policy artifacts begin with a statement like, “this document...supersedes the following documents and memoranda” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 1), which provide a clear trail to follow.

By comparing policy artifacts sequentially, I was able to identify when key changes were made and then explore the contexts of those changes by reviewing the relevant literature at that time. Although this process does not reflect specific the methods of policy archeology or policy genealogy (Gale, 2001), I believe they reflect the overall intent of a policy history. As Gale writes,

Historical accounts of education come in all shapes and sizes (see Connell 1987) but they commonly share an interest ‘to trace the processes of educational change and to expose the possible relationships between the socio-educational present and the socio-educational past’. (Gale, 2001, p. 385)

The tracings of policy histories are largely presented in Chapter 3 but are also incorporated throughout the dissertation as history and hauntings are a part of every apparatus examined.

Quantitative Data

Although there has been a “hermeneutic of suspicion” towards quantitative analysis in the critical and post-structural traditions (Dixon-Román, 2017, p. 157), it has been consistently argued that quantitative data can also “prove illuminating, particularly when it is subjected to the methodological assumptions of critical social science” (Gale, 2001, p. 382). As Gale, quoting Apple, writes, “to dismiss such data as the stuff of positivism is to curtail ‘our ability to raise and answer critical questions about the large-scale effects’ of policy” (Gale, 2001, p. 382). Several critical scholars have embraced quantitative methods as a means of disrupting dominant narratives and unsettling oppression (Garcia et al., 2023; Gillborn et al., 2018; Parekh, 2023). Through their work, they have reclaimed quantification from its positivist traditions and have reoriented it towards a constructivist epistemology by foregrounding power and inequality, acknowledging that data are socially constructed, providing more transparency around assumptions in variables, and engaging in reflexivity.

In a parallel but more expansive move, Dixon-Román (2017; 2016) has reclaimed quantification from its representational traditions by reconfiguring it through a new materialist lens for cultural studies. Dixon-Román (2017) highlights the intra-acting performativities of statistics and situates them as forms of produced knowledge. He writes,

Thus, the researcher, the measuring instrument, the material arrangement of the context of measurement, the discursive practices of measurement, the sampled respondents, the produced and enacted numerical “estimates,” and the phenomena of interest are each ontological entanglements that are (re)configured via their intra-acting performativities... Thus, the question is not whether they “capture” or “validly estimate” that which they are

purported to measure but rather, as an intra-acting agency, what might condition the producing and enacting of these material–discursive phenomena? And how might these intra-acting agencies enact, produce, or come to matter? This line of questioning moves away from representationalist concerns of meaning and validity toward that which is performatively enacted, produced, or matters from the intra-acting agencies of the statistic. (p. 61-2)

This new materialist engagement with statistics opens up possibilities for my own analysis. In this study, I do not treat statistics as transparent reflections of reality, but as material-discursive phenomena that can help estimate the effects produced by the curriculum modification policy ecosystem. However, with this use comes great responsibility as “statistics are frequently mobilized to obfuscate, camouflage, and even to further legitimate racist inequities” (Gillborn et al., 2018, p. 160). I therefore use racial categories in this research with care, drawing from the following assumptions:

- That race is socially constructed, historically situated, and has material consequences as it organizes access to power, opportunity, and resources (Gillborn et al., 2018; Leonardo, 2013; Omi & Winant, 2005);
- That racism operates through structures, discourses, and institutions, including law, media, and education and is particularly intra-connected with capitalism (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Leonardo, 2013);
- That race is inseparable from other dimensions of social identity including, but not limited to class, language, gender, disability, immigration status, religion, sexual orientation, culture, and ethnicity, and therefore understood intersectionally (Crenshaw, 1989; Omi & Winant, 2005);
- That racial groups are heterogeneous and such categories fail to recognize the complexity of difference within every group and the presence of intersectional and multi-racial identities (Leonardo, 2013);
- That the meaning of race is fluid and contextual (Omi & Winant, 2005); and
- That the use of race as a variable in quantitative research “always carries the inherent threat of racist assumptions and actions” (Gillborn et al., 2018, p. 172).

Following Gillborn and colleagues (2018), I use a race/racism couplet in the quantitative analysis in Chapters 4, 5 and 10 to help highlight how it is *racism* that shaped the outcomes, not *race*. Second, I diffract quantitative and qualitative analyses with theoretical insights to avoid

flattening the complexity of racial experience into numerical forms (Chapter 10). Finally, I present my findings from a position of agential realism, recognizing that my interpretation and presentation of the data is produced through complex intra-actions between myself, the data, and other material-discursive forces.

Dataset

It was a privilege to have access to a quantitative dataset from the Board. I accessed this particular dataset—the “transitions” dataset—through my role as a Research Assistant involved with the Critical Transitions research project (described in Chapter 3) under the supervision of Dr. Gillian Parekh. Though I was not originally planning a quantitative component of this project, once I accessed the knowledge produced through the quantitative analyses, I could not separate it from the knowledge produced through my qualitative analysis. Therefore, with the support of my supervisor, Dr Parekh, I obtained permission to integrate quantitative analysis into the present study.

The “transitions” dataset follows students who started Junior Kindergarten in 2008 and finished high school in either June 2022 (4-year high school completion) or June 2023 (5-year high school completion). It includes 32,085 observations but because of extremely high mobility in and out of the Board, the observations within any given year are approximately 16,000-17,000.

It is important to note that this dataset does not include results for self-identified Indigenous students. This is for reasons rooted in Canada’s colonial history resulting in very few students disclosing Indigeneity on the student census. This under-identification results in inaccurate and potentially misleading information, and therefore the Board withholds the information for internal use within its own Indigenous Education Centre. Other exclusions include:

- 1) Students in categories with fewer than 10 observations. This is done in order to protect the anonymity of students.
- 2) Students identified with the Developmental Disability exceptionality.²⁷ This is because these students typically follow an “alternative” program in the Board (explained in

²⁷ Students with intellectual disability in the moderate to severe range (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Please note, exceptionalities will be explained in detail in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3) rather than a “modified” program. I was not able to differentiate between the two types of programs within the dataset.

- 3) Students identified with the Gifted exceptionality. This is because Ontario education policy permits the use of curriculum modifications for the purpose of curriculum enhancement, not just simplification. Though modification for the purpose of enhancement is not permitted in the Board, I could not confirm the nature of modifications in IEPs for these students in the dataset.

In addition to these exclusions, other decisions were made based on the specific analysis and its requirements. For example, when running a longitudinal analysis, students who were not present for the determined period of time were excluded. Due to these variations, specific parameters (number of observations, and additional exclusions) will be provided within the context of each quantitative analysis presented in the subsequent chapters and their corresponding appendices.

Analysis, Additional Exclusions, and Variables Used

In the end, I conducted three clusters of quantitative analyses as outlined below. Detailed descriptions of the each of the variables are provided in Appendix B.

1. Contours of IEP Use. In Chapter 4, I use descriptive statistics (mainly percentages in bar charts) to describe the contours of IEP and curriculum modification use in the Board. These include frequencies of use by placement, subject areas, and identification, as well as initiation and exit points of Modified IEPs.

2. “Inappropriate” Modified IEP Analysis. Also in Chapter 4 is a second cluster of analyses. First, I use descriptive statistics to consider the EQAO scores of students on Modified IEPs, then I zoom in on the students who were placed on a new Modified IEP while in the junior division despite having performed at or above a Level 2 (C) on the EQAO in Grade 3. I tentatively label these cases as “inappropriate” Modified IEPs, though that label is later problematized in Chapter 7. With this subset of students, I conduct a series of four multinomial logistic regressions (i.e., Math, Reading, Writing, and Accommodations-only for all subjects) with IEP type as the dependent variable (categories = No IEP, Accommodation-only IEP, and Modified IEP), and self/parent identified race as the independent variable, with gender and neighbourhood income as co-variables (Appendix E). Because this is a time sensitive, longitudinal analysis (i.e., the measure of performance—EQAO scores, occurs *before* the decision to initiate an IEP) (Fish et al., 2024), the regression only includes students who were enrolled in the Board

from Grades 3 to 6. Variables for suspension history, attendance, Grade 3 report card grades, and Grade 3 Learning Skills grades, were also considered for the models, but were excluded in the end because I believe them to have mediating effects on the outcome variable. Their inclusion would therefore suppress the actual effects of race/racism on the initiation of “inappropriate” IEPs (Cinelli et al., 2024; Fish et al., 2024; Skiba et al., 2016). Yet, in the process of considering models with these variables through a model comparison (Appendix F), I discovered that report card grades are a much stronger predictor of the initiation of “inappropriate Modified IEPs” in all subject areas, which informed the third cluster of analysis described below.

But first, it is important to note that several strategic decisions were made for the regression analyses described above. First, I did not use white students as the reference group (Gillborn et al., 2018). Briefly, the objective of a regression analysis is to estimate the risk of an outcome. The risks of one group are always calculated in relation to another (Stoltzfus, 2011). A common problem with presenting the results in this way is that dominant groups are often chosen as reference groups (white, male), which reifies existing categories and their hierarchies (Garcia et al., 2023; Johfre & Freese, 2021; Young & Diem, 2023). As Johfre and Freese (2021) explain,

Although choosing the reference category may seem arbitrary... it is an intrinsically meaningful act that affects the interpretability of results. Reference category selection foregrounds some contrasts over others. Also, selecting a culturally dominant group as the reference can subtly reify the notion that dominant groups are the most “normal.” (p. 253)

As an alternative, I chose South Asian students as the reference group in the regression analyses involving race because their large population within the Board would make the estimates stable, and because the results produced positive coefficients which were easier to interpret than negative coefficients (Johfre & Freese, 2021). Second, I decided to run the regression analysis using relative risk ratios (RRR) rather than odds ratios (OR) because they are easier to interpret and because odds ratios can overestimate the effects (Muller & MacLehose, 2014). Finally, I decided to present regression results using predicted probabilities based on the mean conditional predictions as it is the default in Stata (Johfre & Freese, 2021). This is a way to avoid making readers interpret coefficients directly (Muller & MacLehose, 2014), and a way to overcome the issues of presenting regression results in relation to the chosen reference group (Johfre & Freese, 2021). I therefore present the full regression tables in Appendix E, but I use graphs based on predicted probabilities in the body of the manuscript.

3. EQAO Compared to Report Card Grades. Based on the exploratory findings of the second cluster of analyses that indicated that report card grades are one of the most powerful pathways towards a new “inappropriate” Modified IEP in the junior division (Appendix F), the third cluster of quantitative analysis, presented in Chapter 5, focuses on the relationship between EQAO results and report card grades. First, I use descriptive statistics to compare the Grade 3 EQAO results with Grade 3 report card grades of students with new “inappropriate” Modified IEPs in Reading, Writing, and Math. Then I conduct three multinomial logistic regressions (Reading, Writing, and Math) with IEP type as the dependent variable (categories = No IEP, Accommodation-only IEP, and Modified IEP), and EQAO/report card grade alignment (categories = lower at school, aligned, and higher at school) as the independent variable, with race, gender, and neighbourhood as co-variables. Results are presented as predicted probabilities in Chapter 5 and the full regression tables are available in Appendix G.

Following this analysis, I conduct three more multinomial logistic regressions (i.e., Reading, Writing, and Math) with EQAO/report card grade alignment (lower at school, aligned, and higher at school) as the dependent variable, and self/parent identified race as the independent variable, with gender and neighbourhood income as co-variables. As with the previous set of regressions, the results are presented in predicted probabilities in Chapter 5 and the full regression tables are available in Appendix H.

Diffraction Analysis

Providing a description of my analytic procedure of the diffractive analysis presents several challenges. First, diffractive analysis does not have a prescribed, linear, replicable procedure. As Barad (2007) explains, a diffractive analysis is not so much a method as it is an analytic practice—a certain way of thinking that produces a certain kind of insight. Second, I came to recognize my methods as diffractive analysis retrospectively through the process of writing and re-analysis. In light of these challenges, rather than proving validity through a prescribed, reproducible sequence of analytic steps, I provide transparency by describing the conditions and moments in which analytic moves were made.

I began by immersing myself in the data through sustained engagement. I read it, I listened to it, I wrote summaries of it, I experimented with it. I conducted multiple rounds of coding. In the end, this coding did not produce my analytic claim. Rather it made the transcripts searchable and in hindsight it helped facilitate familiarization. The coding processes created

opportunities to sort, re-sort, and reconfigure ideas which created opportunities for connections, tensions, and insights to become noticeable. Ultimately, coding was a helpful entry point to analysis, but not the endpoint.

Throughout this process, I was also moving iteratively between datasets, trying to organize my insights into a coherent, linear narrative. These attempts were frustrating and unsuccessful. The relationships between data and insights seemed circular rather than sequential and the tensions between insights seemed contradictory. With the pressure of an external deadline, and an emerging recognition that the process of analysis would never be “complete,” I shifted towards writing. At the time, this shift was made in defeated resignation. In hindsight, I now understand that writing is a powerful analytic practice (St. Pierre, 2018)—one that facilitated the diffractive analysis that was produced.

Through sustained writing, I began to organize clusters of entities, forces, material-discursive practices, phenomena, tensions, and effects that appeared to be closely related. At this stage, my organization of topics was guided by hunches—as Jackson and Massei (2022) describe, “relation[s] that [are] sensed, rather than understood” (p. 4). These provisional assemblages were grouped into chapters, then re-grouped, and then re-grouped again as new relationships came into view. Each chapter came to focus on a particular configuration of relations, or “apparatuses” as I later learned to call them, based on what seemed to matter together. This “boundary-making practice”—choosing what was grouped together, what was foregrounded, and what was excluded—is what Barad (2007) refers to as making “agential cuts.” In the process of writing the background knowledge and contextual material required in each chapter, additional relations and intra-actions often became apparent which further prompted me to reconfigure the apparatuses.

As outlined in Chapter 1, diffractive analysis involves reading heterogeneous entities through one another, attending to what the differences do. Rosiek and colleagues (2024) describe this practice as:

[reading diffractively] takes the form of presenting disparate phenomena alongside one another not to generate conclusions but to performatively generate relational effects. Diffractive analysis does not involve deductive point-by-point comparison but instead offers a curated juxtaposition of topics through which meanings become entangled. The purpose is to abductively generate new possibilities for onto-epistemic relations. (p. 228)

In practice, this meant placing policy documents, interview data, quantitative findings, and theoretical frameworks alongside one another and attending to what their juxtaposition produced.

It is important to note that a diffractive analysis does not replace all other forms of analytic work such as interpretation or description; rather, it is done alongside them, and beyond them towards new explorations. For example, in Chapter 4, I describe a discrepancy between EQAO scores and report card grades—an interpretive finding. An interpretive approach might focus on the discrepancy itself, asking questions such as: Why does this discrepancy occur? Which measure is correct? How might alignment between the two be improved for more accuracy? Had this policy analysis relied heavily on an interpretive approach, the analysis might have reasonably concluded with recommendations to improve assessment criteria or to make time for moderated marking (both of which I ultimately make in Chapter 11). But a diffractive analysis asks something different. Building on interpretive findings, it pivots away from describing, explaining, or resolving discrepancies, and toward examining what happens when different phenomena intra-act. In the case of EQAO scores indicating grade-level achievement, while report card grades indicate underperformance (both interpretive findings), a diffractive analysis foregrounds the effects of this misalignment. One effect is the destabilization of achievement as a stable category. Another is the production of a phenomenon I temporarily refer to as “inappropriate” modification. A further effect is that decisions about curriculum modifications come to privilege grading practices over standardized testing results. These effects are traced and elaborated on in the chapters that follow. Crucially, these diffractive insights open new avenues for policy intervention by shifting attention from technical fixes towards the broader configurations of policies and practices in the education ecosystem.

Ultimately, while the term “diffractive analysis” characterizes the overall methodological orientation of this study, diffractive thinking is conducted alongside other analytical tools and at key moments throughout this dissertation.

2.4 – From Limitations to Partial and Situated Knowledges

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims... I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. Only the god trick is forbidden. (D. Haraway, 1988, p. 589)

The academic convention of a “limitations” section in research dissemination is rooted in positivist assumptions about knowledge creation. A section dedicated to the limits of validity, replicability, and generalization of findings reflects a presumption that research and perhaps knowledge itself is a fixed and complete account of the object. Viewing knowledge as situated, partial, and transient requires that I rework the conventions of a traditional limitations section. First, I situate myself within this research offering some transparency into my entanglement with the topic. Then, I share some of the constraints of this study that create possibilities for future inquiry.

Situating Myself Within the Ecology

Positionality statements have become standard in critical inquiry (Castillo & Babb, 2024; Rogers et al., 2016). This is a reflection of the onto-epistemological assumption that researchers interpret reality from their standpoint according to their lived experiences based on their social locations at the intersections of race, class, ability, gender, sexuality, citizenship, religion, language, and so forth (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016). While positionality statements provide some transparency regarding a researcher’s interpretive lens, have been criticized as shallow engagements with reflexivity (Rogers et al., 2016). Haraway (1988) argues that reflexivity is not just about naming your positionality but about taking responsibility for how your position shapes what you see and do not see. Below, I offer some transparency into my thinking based on my social locations, and I will also periodically insert comments or stories throughout the dissertation to offer additional insights into the more complex ways I am entangled within this project.

My perspectives are largely informed by my lived experiences as a white, economically privileged, straight, cis-gendered female, mother-wife-daughter-sister-friend, who mostly identifies as non-disabled-but-with-several-intermittent-impairments. I was a special education teacher in the Board for over 15 years where I taught in both self-contained and integrated/inclusive settings. I often speak of both the benefits and harms of special education. I have advocated both for and against IEPs for my own children. I sit on the left of the political spectrum, though I am often surrounded by those on the right. I have engaged with and deepened my understanding of several critical theories in my time at York University, particularly in the areas of critical race and critical disability studies. Regrettably, my engagement with feminist and decolonial theories have been more limited which I recognize as both a weakness of this

project and an opportunity for future learning. Similarly, although I have been engaging with agential realism and diffractive methodology through this project, my training wheels are only just coming off and I am still a little wobbly. I acknowledge that both learning, and by extension scholarship, are life-long endeavors and this dissertation only reflects my understandings at this current moment in time—understandings that will continue to evolve.

Acknowledging Constraints and Absences

This study is as much shaped by its constraints and omissions as it is by the data. By acknowledging the constraints and absences I hope to make the boundaries of the knowledge produced through this study more apparent. It is therefore important to note:

- Administrative datasets can have imperfections including errors and missing information. This is because the collection of information is primarily for record keeping rather than research.
- Students in the quantitative dataset graduated in 2022 or 2023. The students discussed in the interviews are in different cohorts that may vary from the data in the quantitative analysis.
- Some policies shifted over the time period of this analysis (e.g., introduction of new Math and Language curricula, changes in IEP policies in the primary division, the introduction of an Individual Learning Plan). These shifts are discussed throughout the chapters but are not captured in the quantitative analysis.
- The quantitative dataset does not include some variables that would enhance analysis. For example, information about subject specific modifications was only available for Grades 3, 6 and 8, not every grade. Additionally, the dataset does not include a variable indicating which students are considered English Language Learners (ELL). This does not mean that ELL students are excluded from analysis, it just means that I could not analyze patterns based on language proficiency status. This is a significant constraint of this study and an important area for future research.
- As mentioned above, self-identified Indigenous students were removed from the dataset. Indigenous students who did not self-identify on the census are included, but not accessible for analysis. This structural absence is an epistemic injustice. As Tuck and Yang write,

Indigenous communities become the asterisk peoples, meaning they are represented by an asterisk in large and crucial data sets, many of which are conducted to inform public policy that impact our/their lives (Villegas, 2012). Education and health statistics are unavailable from Indigenous communities for a variety of reasons and, when they are made available, the size of the n, or the sample size, can appear to be negligible when compared to the sample size of other/race-based categories. Though Indigenous scholars such as Malia Villegas recognize that Indigenous peoples are distinct from each other but also from other racialized groups surveyed in these studies, they argue that difficulty of collecting basic education and health information about this small and heterogeneous category must be overcome in order to counter the disappearance of Indigenous particularities in public policy. (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 22)

- Similarly, students who identified as non-binary were often dropped from analysis because they were too few in numbers to be statistically reliable. Students with incomplete data—often those who were only temporarily in the Board, a group that is disproportionately made up of communities experiencing high mobility—could not be included in analysis.

Together, these constraints and absences, particularly the omission of data for Indigenous students, ELL students, non-binary students, and transient students, underscores how structural exclusions shape what can be analyzed and what/who is rendered invisible in policy research.

2.5 – Ethical Considerations

This study received full ethics approval from both York University (REB STU 2023-006) and the Board (ERRC 2022-23 6472293067) prior to data collection.

For the components of the study involving participants, informed consent was obtained prior to the interview and focus group sessions and reviewed during the sessions. Participants were informed that they could leave the session at any point and would still receive the inducement of \$20 in the form of a gift card. The confidentiality of all participants was protected through the use of pseudonyms, the de-identification of data, and the exclusion of details that might make their identities obvious. Interview and focus group data is stored on a password protected drive and computer. Recordings and survey data will be deleted after the study has concluded, though written transcripts may be kept for future related research.

Quantitative data was handled in accordance with Board guidelines. It is stored on a password protected drive and computer and my access to it will be terminated upon the

completion of this study. Information produced through this project is only shared with the permission of the Director of Research at the Board.

As described earlier, Barad argues that ethics are inseparable from knowing and being, especially in research. As Roziek and colleagues (2024) explain,

By highlighting this condition, diffractive analysis leaves a reader and researcher in a relation of both enhanced agency and increased responsibility: enhanced agency because it includes participation in generating possibility, not just representations; increased responsibility because inquirers are responsible not just for the relational possibilities eventually affirmed but also for those possibilities that are not acted on. We might call these the “null side effects,” the possibilities not realized and perhaps not even recognized. It is this relation of intensified onto-ethical responsibility that Barad called “entanglement.” (p. 230)

As outlined above, I am mindful when presenting race-based data to resist racecraft by framing disparities as the product of racism, and not inherent to racial differences (Fields & Fields, 2012; Gillborn et al., 2018). Likewise, I attempt to frame disability categories as material-discursive products rather than naturalized categories. Overall, I enter the dissemination stage of this research with a sense of responsibility for how I represent participants, how I represent inequities, and for how my work may be taken up.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) was used in a limited way to support writing clarity—primarily, as an extremely sophisticated thesaurus and as a way to check my use of writing conventions (use of commas, semi-colons, m-dashes, etc.). Occasionally, I engaged in longer discussions with ChatGPT to help clarify challenging concepts such as Barad’s intra-actions, or the difference between odds ratios and predicted probabilities. Any information or understandings gained from those “tutoring” sessions were verified through academic literature review, which I had a greater capacity for understanding after my preliminary tutoring with ChatGPT. I did not use AI tools to generate data, transcribe data, code data, conduct analysis, or produce findings. One software program (Atlas.ti), added AI features in an automatic system update without my approval. Since I did not have participant consent to use such features, I quickly rolled back the update to an earlier version to ensure the data was not accessed by AI. This dissertation reflects my own thinking and scholarship. I take full responsibility for the ideas, interpretations, and conclusions it puts forward.

Concluding Thoughts

After many months of struggle, I have come to see that a methodology informed by agential realism, diffractive analysis, and policy ecology offers a helpful way “to look for the iterations embedded within chaos” (Ball, 1993, p. 43). Mindful of the ethical responsibility that comes with engaging in research, and of the destructive effects of polarization that are so pervasive in the world around me, I follow Lather (1993) who writes,

I have tried to construct a non-agonistic narrative which proceeds otherwise than by thinking via oppositions. In a place where there is no innocent discourse of liberation, my hope has been to use both our internal contradictions and our differences across one another to refigure community, to include ways of disagreeing productively among ourselves, as we struggle to use postmodernism to both problematize and advance emancipatory pedagogy. (p. 132)

Or, in my case, policy research. In this spirit, I aim to trace the landscape of the curriculum modification policy ecology to open space for generative re-imaginings. In the following chapters, I map this terrain in greater depth, tracing how intra-acting forces produce the enactment of the curriculum modification policy in the Board.

Chapter 3: Background Information and Literature Review

Charting the Historic and Contemporary Contexts of Curriculum Modifications

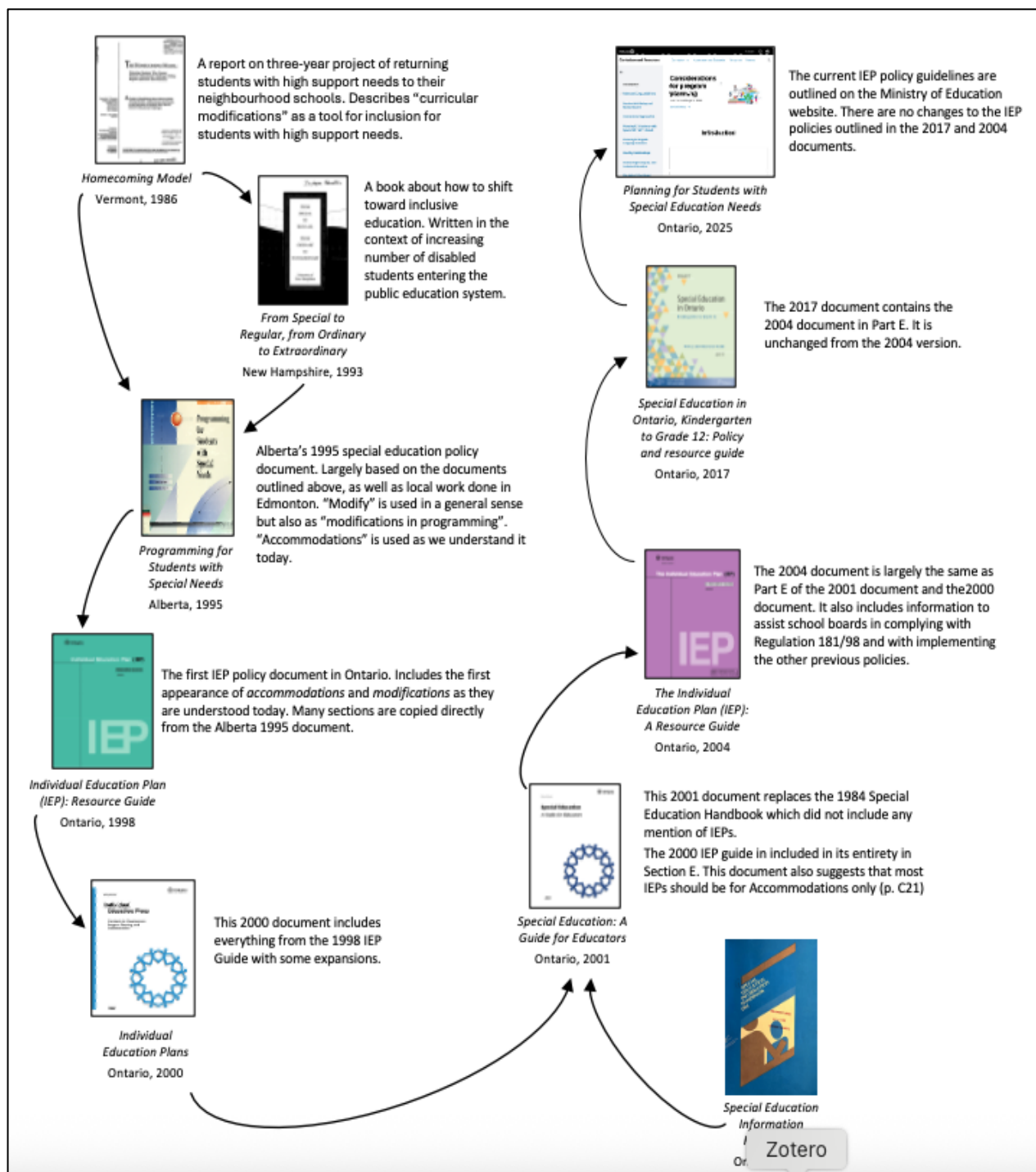
Getting Lost, then, is a palimpsest where primary and secondary texts collapse into trace-structures of one another that fold both backward and forward into books full of concealments, not knowings and an uncanny time of what 'will always have already taken place.' (Lather, 2009, p. 4)

In this chapter, I begin to trace the curriculum modification ecology by combining the literature review with the analyses of the policy artifacts. My goal is to begin to situate the curriculum modification policy within the broader systemic, historic, geographic, and academic contexts. First, in Section 3.1, I begin to situate the curriculum modification policy in its historic context through a brief policy history to investigate its origins. In Section 3.2, I situate the curriculum modification policy within an academic context by conducting a scoping literature review investigating what is currently known about curriculum modifications in academic literature. In Section 3.3, I situate the Ontario curriculum modification ecosystem within a larger geographic context by investigating how, when, why, and for whom curriculum modifications are used in other provinces and territories across Canada. This chapter is only the beginning of situating the curriculum modification ecosystem within these broader contexts. Like an image slowly coming into focus, more details and relationships will be added to the ecosystem in the chapters that follow.

3.1 – A Policy History

Ontario's current IEP and curriculum modification policies are outlined in the 2017 policy and resource guide, *Special Education in Ontario: Kindergarten to Grade 12* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). By tracing the lineage of this document (Figure 3.1), I was able to identify that IEPs and the bipartite system of accommodations and modifications were formally introduced in Ontario in the 1998 resource guide, *Individual Education Plan (IEP)* (Ontario, 1998). This guide was largely influenced by Alberta's IEP²⁸ policies which were outlined in the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* document (Alberta, 1995). In fact, with

²⁸ Known as "IPPs" (Individual Program Plans) in Alberta (Alberta, 1995).

Figure 3.1*The Lineage of the Current IEP Policies in Ontario*

Note. Images and information drawn from (Alberta, 1995; Ontario, 1998, 2000; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1984, 2001, 2004b, 2017, 2024; Tashie et al., 1993; Thousand et al., 1986)

permission, large portions were copied verbatim (Ontario, 1998, p. v). Although the term *modification* is used inconsistently throughout the Alberta (1995) document, the citations for the resources supporting “curriculum modification” (found in Appendices 21-26) are predominantly from books, reports, and articles of the late 1980s and early 1990s pertaining to students with significant support needs (e.g., Tashie et al., 1993; Thousand et al., 1986). Beginning with these sources, I surveyed literature of this era to understand the context in which curriculum modifications first emerged.

The term *modification* in a special education context emerged in academic literature in the late 1970s and early 1980s during the mainstreaming movement taking hold across North America. In 1975, the U.S. federal government passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) mandating that all children, regardless of the type or degree of disability, have access to a free and appropriate education (*Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975*, 1975). Like Ontario’s 1980 Education Amendment Act, this legislation allowed disabled students, who had previously been excluded from their local neighbourhood schools, access to public education.

Including disabled students in mainstream classrooms also meant that they would be included in the curriculum, teaching, and learning occurring in these settings. Not surprisingly, this shift generated some resistance. Ferguson and Baumgart (1991) summarized four logics underlying the arguments against including disabled students in the mainstream curriculum:

1. If the student’s IQ test determines they are below the mental age where the skill typically appears, they should not participate (the developmental age argument).
2. If they will not do all of it, they should not participate (the all-or-nothing argument).
3. If they will not be able to do it independently, they should not participate (the independent performance argument).
4. If they do not have the prerequisite skills, they should not participate (the prerequisite skills hypothesis).

Education literature responded with instructions on how teachers could “modify” their programs (e.g., curriculum, teaching methods, materials, environment) to “accommodate” students with “the most severe and profound disabilities” (D. L. Ferguson & Baumgart, 1991, p. 281). These general “program modifications” were based on what Baumgart and colleagues (1982) called the

principle of partial participation (PPP), which encouraged individualized adaptation that would enable students to participate, at least partially, with their same-aged peers.

The U.S. reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 effectively legislated this concept into policy (Fisher & Frey, 2001). The legislation came at a time of intense debate between functional programming such as self-care and life skills programs (e.g., “alternative” IEP goals in the Ontario context – see Chapter 1) and access to the general curriculum (e.g., literacy and numeracy) for students identified as having intellectual disabilities—a tension that educators continue to navigate today (Finnerty et al., 2019). IDEA required that IEPs include “measurable goals to enable the child to be involved with and progress in the general curriculum” (Wehmeyer et al., 2001, p. 327). Modifications (also inconsistently called “adaptations,” “accommodations,” “alterations,” or “augmentations”) were therefore encouraged as a way for students to gain access to academic instruction that they would not otherwise have exposure to (Fisher & Frey, 2001; Wehmeyer et al., 2001).

The Introduction of Curriculum Modification in Ontario

The accountability movement influenced similar trends in Ontario. As described in Chapter 1, in 1995, Mike Harris’s conservative government began a substantial overhaul of the education system that included centralizing school funding, amalgamating school boards, introducing province-wide testing and a standardized report card, and cutting almost a billion dollars from the education budget (Jaafar & Anderson, 2007; Jang & Sinclair, 2018; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1997; O’Sullivan, 1999).

At the pedagogical level, the introduction of a province-wide standardized curriculum for every subject and every grade marked a radical shift. The previous curriculum, known as *The Common Curriculum* (Ontario Department of Education, 1995), and *The Formative Years, Circular PIJI* (Ontario Department of Education, 1975) had only contained vague guidelines for students to meet by the ends of Grades 3, 6, and 9, and, for the most part, standards, content, scope, and sequence were to be determined by local teachers, schools, and boards. This flexible approach prioritized the understanding that children learn at different rates and that different geographic regions and school contexts required differently responsive curricula.

The major responsibility for planning curriculum rests with the school. Only by accepting this responsibility can it respond to the special needs and characteristics of the children in its care and work towards achieving the aims of the school and the school system. (Ontario Department of Education, 1975, p. 5)

The 1997 introduction of a standardized, grade-by-grade curriculum for all subject areas was a sharp departure but was justified from an equity standpoint.

All students, irrespective of their location in the region, should receive the same education if the same curriculum is taught, which theoretically allows for equal opportunities and outcomes. (Jaafar & Anderson, 2007, p. 212)

The new standardized curriculum was accompanied by drastic shifts in assessment and evaluation policies. In a professional development video titled *Implementing Ontario's new curriculum*, Deputy Minister of Education and Training, Veronica Lacey stated:

For the first time in many years, we have provided teachers and parents with clear, detailed statements of what we expect students to learn in school. We have also taken an additional step. We have defined how well we want it to be learned by including the assessment levels as part of the curriculum... This combination of clear expectations and clear standards for assessment means that teachers and parents can be confident that consistent foundations for learning have been put in place across Ontario. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1998, min. 1:25)

From the outset, it was recognized that not all students with disabilities would be able to fully access the standardized curriculum. The introduction of the new curriculum in 1997, and new achievement standards in 1998, were therefore accompanied by Regulation 181/98 in 1998—the first legal requirement to use IEPs for all students identified as “exceptional” in Ontario. This requirement was supported with an IEP resource guide (Ontario, 1998) where the terms *accommodation* and *modification* were used as distinct concepts in Ontario policy for the first time. It outlines:

Expectational pupils should be given every opportunity to achieve the learning expectations set out in the Ontario curriculum policy documents. In fact, the expectations for most exceptional pupils will be the same as, or similar to, those in the Ontario curriculum. However, they may be modified from those in curriculum policy documents, or they may be alternatives developed to reflect the individual student's strengths and needs. Expectations could be:

- The same as the appropriate grade expectations in the Ontario curriculum, but with accommodations (supports or services that help the student access the curriculum and demonstrate learning).
- Differentiated, as in gifted programs.
- Selected from the Ontario curriculum, but with modifications (changes to the grade-level expectations) or accommodations; or
- Alternative expectations, modified so extensively from those in the Ontario curriculum that, in effect, the curriculum's expectations do not form the basis for the program area. (pp. 20-21)

The policy documents that followed in 2000, 2001, and 2004, further clarified and expanded the policy to what it is today (Ontario, 2000; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001, 2004b).

Another Kind of Curriculum Modification

As the concept of curriculum modification emerged within special education, the term *modification* was also being introduced with a different meaning in the context of teaching English Language Learners (ELLs). In the ELL context, “modification” also refers to altering the curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007); however, these modifications are documented in a different kind of paperwork and they do not have the same long-term consequences as Modified IEPs. Unfortunately, many of the policy translation resources released in the late 1990s to facilitate the implementation of the new curriculum and evaluation policies, encouraged modification as a way to assist both students involved with special education and English Language Learners (Ontario Ministry of Education & TVOntario, 2000), though the nature of the modifications in the two contexts was different. Perhaps it is this coupling of special education and ELL with the same term (“modification”) that has contributed to the ongoing, stubborn association between the two today. As several studies have shown, ELL students are disproportionately over-represented in inappropriate referrals and special education programs (Klingner et al., 2005). The proportion of ELL students on Modified IEPs is an important area for future research.

In the following section, I return to curriculum modifications within the special education context to situate the policy in relation to existing empirical research. By asking what is currently known about curriculum modifications, I identify key gaps in the literature and point to opportunities for future inquiry.

3.2 – A Scoping Literature Review²⁹

Scoping reviews are designed to broadly map the relevant literature in a field and identify areas where evidence is uneven. They are particularly well-suited for topics that have not been thoroughly researched (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005). This scoping review follows the guidelines of the *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis Protocols: Extension*

²⁹ This section is drawn from a scoping literature review that was published in *Exceptionality Education International* in 2025. See Barron, K. (2024). What is known about curriculum modifications? A scoping literature review. *Exceptionality Education International*, 34(2), 36–55.

for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-SCR) (Tricco et al., 2018). The purpose of this literature review is to situate the curriculum modification policy within academic literature by determining what is known about curriculum modifications. Specifically, (1) what terms are used in academic literature to describe IEP practices such as accommodations and modifications? (2) what aspects of curriculum modifications have been studied? (3) for which exceptionality groups are modifications used? and (4) what conclusions are promoted in the literature?

Search Methods

To identify relevant studies, I worked with a librarian to develop search protocols and conduct searches in four databases, including ERIC, JSTOR, Scholar's Portal, and SAGE Journals. These databases were chosen because they encompass a large body of education literature. The searches were limited to English-only peer-reviewed articles. There were no restrictions on geographic locations or publication dates during the initial collection of articles. Search terms generally included “curriculum,” “modification,” “IEP,” and sometimes “adaptation”; however there were some variations between databases due to their particular synonyms and specific search requirements. Efforts were made to cast as wide a net as possible while keeping in mind the limitations of a single researcher. The searches were conducted in August 2023. See Appendix C for a table of search terms used for each database.

To be included in this review, papers needed to at least mention the use of modifications or adaptations (a commonly used synonym) in the context of supporting students with IEPs. Peer-review journal articles were included if they were written in English and focused on K-12 education. Papers were excluded if they referred to modifying curricula in a context other than special education (e.g., customizing curricula for a particular school, modifying a specialty program), or were in exclusive reference to increasing the level of difficulty in the context of gifted education. Grey literature and non-academic resources were also excluded.

Analysis

Categories of analysis were developed inductively over three rounds of analysis based on the specific objectives of this scoping review and patterns observed in the data (Kennedy, 2018). Articles were coded and charted according to the criteria below. See Appendix D for a table of results.

Terminology

Based on the first research question, terms used to describe the practices of reducing barriers (accommodations) and lowering expectations (modifications) were identified and sorted into the following categories: (a) the concepts are defined separately and the authors use “accommodation” and “modification” as described above, (b) the concepts are defined separately but authors use different terminology, (c) the concepts are not defined separately – authors use definitions or examples that combine or conflate the two practices (e.g., “adaptations”), (d) authors do not provide definitions and appear to conflate the concepts, (e) no definitions are provided and it is not possible to infer their meaning.

Exceptionality

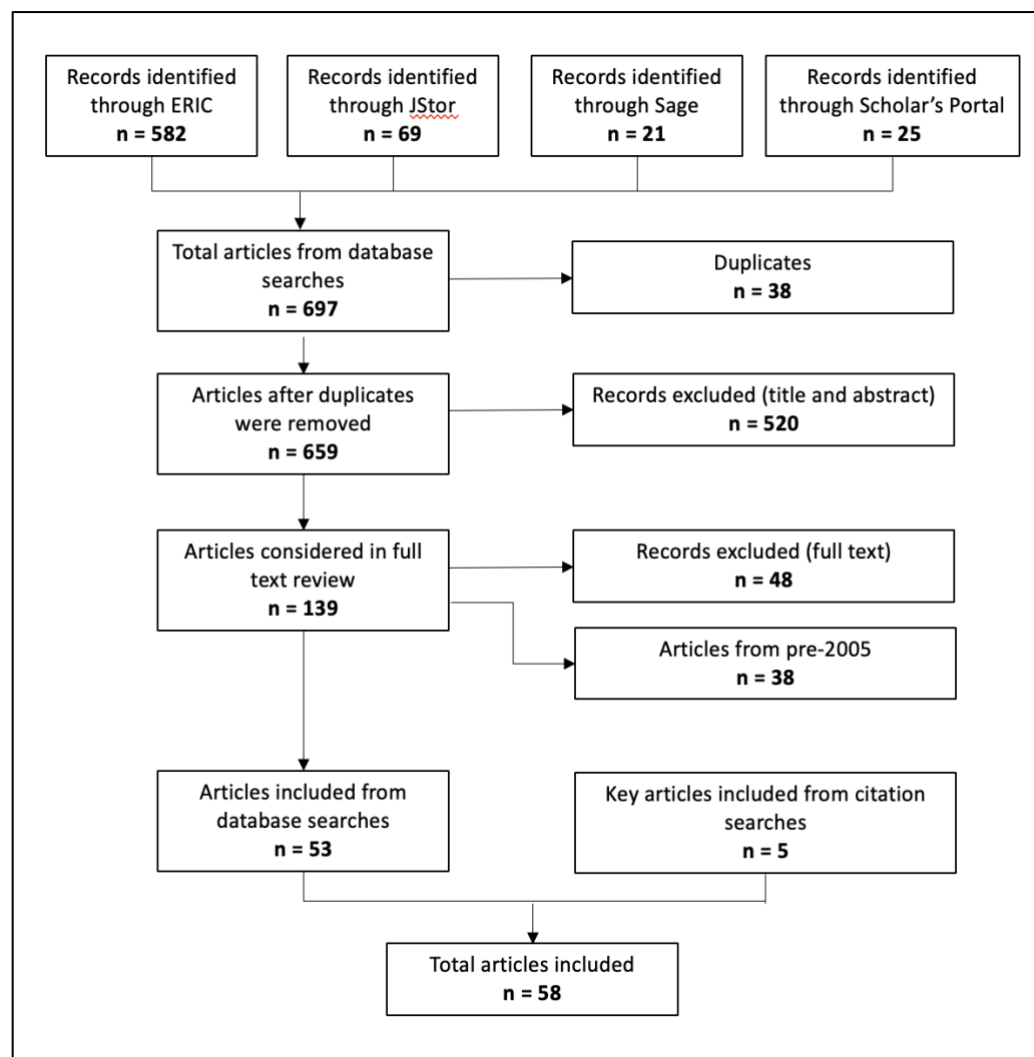
Exceptionality groups were identified and charted in two ways: first, by recording the disability using the original language of the authors, and second, by categorizing them into the following groups: (a) students with significant support needs/identified as having intellectual disability, (b) other specific exceptionality groups, and (c) pan-disability/pan-special education - unspecified.

Authors’ Position

Authors’ positions on modifications were categorized as (a) promotes modifications, (b) promotes modifications with caution, (c) describes modifications in a neutral way, (d) assumes a critical or cautionary stance.

Results and Interpretations

The initial search yielded 659 unique articles (697 before duplicates were removed). All titles and abstracts were read by this researcher to determine compatibility with the inclusion criteria listed above. A full 520 articles were eliminated, leaving 139 articles for the in-text review stage. By using search tools to efficiently home in on how key terms were used within the body of the text, 48 more articles were excluded, leaving 91. Articles were further reduced by excluding 38 that were published before 2005, leaving 53 articles from database searches to be charted in this scoping review. After an initial round of analysis, five additional articles were added using citation searches (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005). A total of 58 articles were included in this scoping review (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2*Scoping Review Search Results*

Only three of the 58 articles were situated within the Canadian context. Most were situated in the United States ($n = 35$). Twenty articles came from overseas, including Australia ($n = 2$), Botswana, Brazil, Ethiopia, Greece ($n = 2$), Hong Kong ($n = 2$), Korea, Taiwan, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Kenya, South Africa, and Switzerland ($n = 2$).

Definitions of IEP Terms

Two significant issues are apparent in the use of IEP terminology. First, 47% of articles ($n = 27$) defined the concepts of eliminating barriers (accommodations) and lowering expectations (*modifications*) separately, however the terminology is inconsistent and often contradictory. Second, roughly 45% of articles ($n = 26$) combined or conflated the concepts of accommodations

and modifications rendering their differing effects invisible. In 8% of the articles ($n = 5$) no definitions or examples were provided and it was not possible to infer the authors' meaning.

Of the 27 articles that separated the concepts of reducing barriers and lowering expectations, 23 articles used the terms “accommodation” and “modification” as they are defined in Ontario and several other jurisdictions (e.g., Alberta, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, and the US Department of Education). Sometimes these terms were used under the umbrella term of “adaptations.”

In four articles (McLeod & McKinnon, 2010; Paccaud & Luder, 2017; Tremblay & Belley, 2017; Zhang et al., 2014), authors referred to the same concepts but reversed the terminology. For example, Tremblay and Belley (2017), in line with Quebec, Manitoba, BC, Yukon, and Nova Scotia, used “accommodation” as the umbrella term to encompass both “adaptations” (equivalent to accommodations) and modifications (the lowering of expectations). Within this framework, a modification is a type of “accommodation” and therefore, the term “accommodation” can include the practice of lowering expectations. This means that articles and policy documents using this framework need careful examination so that findings can be properly interpreted and synthesized.

The second issue relating to terminology is the problem of conflation. Roughly 44% of articles ($n = 26$) combined or conflated the concepts of accommodation, modifications, and teaching strategies. In 16 articles, authors combined the concepts under a general umbrella such as “adaptation” and provided examples of both reducing barriers and lowering expectations. Twelve of these articles were written outside the North American context (Taiwan, Ethiopia, Botswana, Greece, Kenya, Iceland, Brazil and Hong Kong) and were promoting generic strategies for including students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms and schools—often citing literature on differentiation. Those that were written within the North American context also promoted a blend of accommodations and modifications, but in the context of including students identified as having intellectual disability.

In 10 articles, the authors appeared to unknowingly conflate the terms. This was evident when the terms were used inconsistently or interchangeably, when the two terms were combined as if they are one practice (e.g., “accommodations/modifications”), or by logics that demonstrate confusion of the objectives or effects of modifications. For example, Butler and Nasser (2020) write that “despite having supportive accommodations and modifications, Illinois students who

receive special education services have lagged behind their general education peers” (p. 1). Here, the authors reveal an assumption that, like accommodations, the purpose of modifications is to close learning gaps when in fact it is not possible to close the gap as long as the modification is in place. A second example is Lin and Lin (2015) who ask teacher candidate participants to respond to the statement “It is very useful to modify assessment for students with special needs” (to be answered on a 5-point Likert scale). This question is inappropriate if modification is understood as a practice that is only necessary for *some* students who cannot access grade-level expectations despite having high-quality accommodations in place.

Implications for Research Process. Confusion resulting from variation in terminology or conflation of concepts was evident throughout the empirical literature and seemed to affect every stage of the research process. Within literature reviews, several authors appeared to interpret previous research differently than how the original authors (or participants of their studies) intended. For example, in their literature review, Brown and colleagues (2008) quote a study as saying:

General educators have displayed apprehension toward the adaptation of testing materials due to the perception that it will violate their classroom standards and have shown preference for accommodation over modification when assessment techniques are to be applied to students with learning disabilities. (p. 2088)

If modifications are understood as a practice that has long term consequences and should only be used under specific circumstances, this reluctance from teachers would be interpreted as judicious. Instead, Brown and colleagues (2008) conclude: “Unfavorable attitudes of general educators toward inclusion in general and inflexibility toward modifying assessment techniques have been documented previously” (p. 2092).

Some authors reported difficulty during the data collection and analysis stages when they realized that their participants did not share their understandings of the terms. For example, Cho and Kingston (Cho & Kingston, 2013) write: “None of the teachers knew the concept of modifications in the context of tests and instructions” (p. 169). And later:

There was initial disagreement on whether classroom modifications were a subtheme....

Modifications are relevant to a student’s opportunity to learn; however, as teachers are confused about the word modification and as “substantial adjustment to the general curriculum” is the phrase used in the state eligibility guidelines, we agreed, after deliberation, to include modifications under the first theme. (p. 166)

Other authors seem less aware of having conflicting understandings with their participants. In one study, Raven and Whitman (2019) investigated how teachers in a specialized school for Deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) students teach science. While they did not define their use of the term “modification,” they did include examples of visual supports and repetition of instruction which suggests that their definition either refers to or includes accommodations. Based on some participant responses quoted in the paper, it appears that the teachers may have had a different understanding of the term “modification.” The authors wrote,

One participant was very adamant in stating that she does not modify the content of her class for her DHH students, “So I do not modify their stuff... I do not think of them any differently than my other students. And nobody should” (p. 1009).

Another participant was quoted as saying “It’s really one of those subjects where I do more accommodating than modifying” (p. 1008). The authors concluded “the ways in which teachers modify their instruction to meet students’ needs are not sufficient to help these students to be on par with their grade level peers as evidenced through standards-based test scores” (p. 1008). While it may be unfair to conclude that there was a misunderstanding between researchers and participants, given the terminology variation observed in this scoping review, it is a strong possibility.

Implications for Research Dissemination. The greatest consequence of the variation in terminology and conflation of concepts likely occurs during the dissemination stage when readers, unaware of this confusion, draw conclusions based on their own understandings of the terms. This is of particular concern in the Canadian context where provinces and territories use a variety of frameworks. Terms employed in one jurisdiction may mean opposite concepts in another jurisdiction. Without careful reading and translation of terms, this may have significant implications when results or conclusions are drawn from empirical research and used to support policy decisions.

When all of the articles in this scoping review are considered, there is a strong pattern of positive promotion of curriculum modifications. Some 64% ($n = 37$) promote their use as necessary, benevolent, and an essential part of inclusive teaching. This results in the heedless promotion of a practice that may inadvertently limit future opportunities for some students. In contrast, when we only consider the empirical articles that specifically analyse the practice of lowering expectations ($n = 14$), only two studies (which is 3% of the overall sample) actively promote the practice, while four describe it in a neutral way, and eight assume a critical or

cautionary stance. Problematically, the resolute, uncritical promotion of curriculum modifications in much of the academic literature leads to pan-disability, or even more broadly, pan-special education generalizations. In a literature review, Moores-Abdool (2010) concludes that “students with autism need curriculum modifications or instructional accommodations to access the general curriculum” (p. 154). This is a potentially harmful conclusion given that many autistic students are more than capable of meeting grade-level expectations with or without accommodations.

These observations serve as a warning to readers, reviewers, editors, and fellow researchers studying accommodations, modifications, and IEPs. The landscape is challenging, and the inconsistent and often contradictory terminology presents obstacles; however, it can be overcome by paying close attention to authors’ definitions or descriptions of the practices, rather than the actual terms. With careful interpretation, helpful insights can be gleaned from such articles. Conversely, articles that combine or conflate the practices offer little information about the efficacy of modifications, thereby cloaking a potentially harmful practice in discourses of benevolence, assumptions of necessity, and perceptions of “good teaching.”

What is Actually Known About Curriculum Modifications?

What started as a modest body of literature shrank to only 14 articles when discussion papers and studies with issues of conflation were excluded. At this stage of analysis, only articles that both defined and analysed the concepts of reducing barriers and lowering expectations separately were included. Ten studies were conducted in the American context, two in Switzerland, and one each from Australia and India.

Studies Assuming a Favourable Stance. As mentioned above, only two of the 14 articles (Kurth et al., 2019; Vaughan & Henderson, 2016) actively promoted the practice of lowering expectations. Both of these studies were conducted within the context of supporting and including students identified as having significant support needs and intellectual disability. It is important to note that, although excluded from this stage of analysis because *modifications* and *accommodations* were not analysed separately, there were an additional five studies and three discussion papers that also promoted the practice in the context of including students identified as having intellectual disability in classes structured around the mainstream curriculum. This body of literature includes discussions on *how* to modify curricula as well as the benefits of the practice (Janney & Snell, 1997). Though published after 2005 as per the inclusion criteria, these

articles were continuations of the discussions of the late 1990s and early 2000s after the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the U.S. as described in Section 3.1.

Studies Assuming a Neutral Stance. Four of the 14 studies included in the second stage of analysis reported their findings from a neutral stance. In two of these studies, curriculum modifications were just one variable in a broader investigation into what strategies and supports were being employed to support “students with speech-language impairments” (Mashburn & Myers, 2010) and “students with additional learning needs” (McLeod & McKinnon, 2010). In a nation-wide Australian study, McLeod and McKinnon (2010) found that “students who received the greatest curriculum [modifications] were those with intellectual disability + physical/medical disability” (p. 123). Meanwhile, in the USA, based on the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), Mashburn and Myers (2010) found that:

modifications to the general education curriculum for children whose primary diagnosis was speech-language impairment were uncommon. More than 70% of kindergartners, first graders, and third graders were in classrooms within which no modifications were made to the general education curriculum, and 61% of fifth graders experienced no modifications to their general classroom curriculum. Across the grade levels, modifications that were made to the curriculum were rarely reported to be “substantial” or involve “specially designed materials.” (p. 67)

In the third study, Paccaud and Luder (2017) found that students with “learning difficulties” had fewer modifications than students with “behavior problems” (which included students with “more severe cognitive limitations and behavioral problems”) (p. 221). In the final study, Dee (2010) found that pre-service teachers were not prepared to make appropriate adaptations, accommodations, and modifications based on their students’ IEPs.

Studies Assuming a Cautionary Stance. The remaining eight articles in this subset assumed a critical or cautionary stance. Eichhorn (2016) examined the long-term implications of modifications in secondary school math for students with math-learning disabilities in Maharashtra, India. They observed that:

while the current educational policy aims to help students with learning disabilities participate in the general education curriculum and pass the 10th standard secondary exam, the implementation of curricular modifications has repercussions in post-secondary settings when students lack the math content knowledge for a required math course in their Bachelor’s degree program. (p. 75)

In Switzerland, Sahli Lozano and colleagues (2022) showed negative labeling effects based on IEP decisions. They found that students with lowered learning objectives were systematically underestimated by their teachers regarding their cognitive abilities, which was not the case for students receiving accommodations.

The six other articles in the set (Cho & Kingston, 2013, 2014, 2015; Lazarus et al., 2015; Musson et al., 2010; Shaftel & Rutt, 2011) discussed modification in the context of lowered expectations on standardized state-testing in the USA. To understand these findings, some historical context is necessary. Briefly, changes to the IDEA legislation in 1997 had several effects on special education practices. As discussed in Chapter 1, it required that IEPs contain measurable goals. Secondly, it stipulated that all disabled students be included in accountability measures, including state-wide tests. For students who were unable to access state-wide assessments with accommodations, states were instructed to create an “Alternate Assessments based on Alternate Achievement Standards” (AA-AAS) (Cho & Kingston, 2014). It was argued that “when students with disabilities are out of sight in assessment and accountability systems, they are out of mind when policy decisions are made and when educational structures and programs are designed” (Ysseldyke & Olsen, 1999, as cited in Musson et al., 2010). While the creation of the AA-AAS facilitated the inclusion of students identified as having intellectual disabilities in accountability systems, it also created a way for school systems to “hide” low-performing students by directing them to the AA-AAS rather than the standard state-wide tests. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was enacted. It required that states close the achievement gap between subgroups of students including racialized students, poor students, disabled students, and English Language Learners. It also limited eligibility for the AA-AAS to those with “significant cognitive disabilities”. While the legislation did not define “significant cognitive disabilities,” states were only allowed to issue the AA-AAS to a maximum of 1% of their students (Cho & Kingston, 2014). These legislative changes caused concern for many school districts who were “hiding” students in the AAAS and worried that they wouldn’t meet their annual gap-closing targets. There was particular concern about students who would fall in between criteria for the AA-AAS and success on the standard test (HB05 Study Committee, 2005). In response to this concern, the federal government released legislation in April of 2007 that allowed states to use Alternate Assessments based on Modified Assessment Standards (AA-MAS) for up to 2% of the student population (Lazarus et al., 2015).

Returning to the articles in this dataset, Lazarus and colleagues (2015) and Shaftel and Rutt (2011) reported that those assigned to the AA-MAS disproportionately came from historically underserved populations, including some groups of racialized students, English Language Learners, and those experiencing poverty. Cho and Kingston (2013, 2014, 2015) conducted three studies interrogating teachers' rationales for test-type decisions. They found that students were being inappropriately assigned to both the AA-AAS and AA-MAS because of low expectations for historically marginalized students, low-quality accommodations, and vagueness of eligibility criteria. Their findings raise concerns about the subjectivity of the modification decision process and the overall lack of grade-level instruction for many low-performing students both with and without disabilities. On March 15, 2011, the US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, announced:

I want to say here and now for the record that we are moving away from the 2% rule. We will not issue another policy that allows districts to disguise the educational performance of 2% of students. That's unacceptable, and that must change. We have to expect the very best from our students and to tell the truth about student performance so that we can give all students the supports and the services they need. (Lazarus et al., 2015, p. 232)

Four years after the AA-MAS was enacted, it was cancelled.

The story of the "rise and fall of modified state assessments" (Lazarus et al., 2015, p. 231) offers a cautionary tale regarding educational decision-making processes. While it is clear that modifications are essential for the inclusion of some students, they may limit future opportunities for others. Ultimately, the issue is not about whether or not modifications exist, but rather how educational decisions are made and who is perceived to require a pathway of lowered expectations.

Summary

This scoping review has revealed that there is very little usable research on the practice of modification. The technical terminology (e.g., accommodation, adaptation, modification) is used inconsistently by researchers and practitioners leading to misunderstandings that affect every stage of the research process. Dissemination of IEP research is particularly concerning as it may result in heedless promotion of "modifications" leading to misinformed policy decisions. Many authors also conflate the terms accommodation and modification. This is problematic because it renders much of the available literature on the impacts of modifications untenable and obscures the consequences of the separate practices.

After considering issues of conflicting terminology and conflation, there is only a handful of articles addressing the topic of modifications. Research in the context of supporting students identified as having intellectual disability rightfully promotes the practice as an important tool for inclusion and access to academic instruction. But while it is clear that curriculum modifications are enabling for students with intellectual disability, there are very few studies examining the use of modifications with student with other exceptionality labels, necessitating the question: Who does not benefit from curriculum modifications?

3.3 – A Cross-Canada Comparative Content Analysis

The final component of this literature review is a brief examination of IEP policies across Canada, asking where and how are curriculum modifications used. To answer this question, I collected over 20 policy documents from the 13 provinces and territories found on Ministry of Education websites. I then charted each jurisdiction's definitions of accommodation and modification, documented how modifications are used, and any noted additional guidelines for the use of curriculum modifications and IEPs.

Observations

All 13 provinces and territories in Canada and their associated federally run schools permit the use of curriculum modifications.³⁰ However, there is considerable variation in their terminology, documentation, and enactment parameters.

Terminology

It is important to note that IEP terminology differs across both jurisdictions and time periods. Ontario, New Brunswick, Alberta, and the U.S. Department of Education all use the term *accommodation* as described in this dissertation. However, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, PEI, and the Yukon, use the term *adaptation* instead. This variation can be confusing because some research uses the term *adaptation* as an umbrella term to encompass *accommodation* (as Ontario uses it) and *modification*, while other research uses the term *accommodation* as an umbrella term for *adaptations* (what Ontario calls *accommodation*) and *modifications*. This

³⁰ This section is based on information from: (Alberta Education, 2006; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009, 2016; Department of Education, 2021; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2016, 2019; Government of Quebec, n.d.; Government of Yukon, n.d.; Hall, 2015; Manitoba Education, 2010; Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment, 2006; Nunavut Education Act, 2008; *Service Delivery Model Forms*, n.d.; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015, 2017a, 2017b).

means that depending on the jurisdiction, *accommodation* and *adaptation* could be referring to modifying expectations. For example, in the Northwest Territories, curriculum modifications are documented in an Individual Accommodation Plan. Therefore, care must be taken when examining policies from multiple jurisdictions in order to avoid misinterpretations.

As for the term *modification*, Ontario, Manitoba, and the U.S. Department of Education use it as described in this dissertation. However, Alberta, Newfoundland and Labrador, and British Columbia tend to use *modification* to describe both modified curriculum expectations and alternative expectations. Quebec does not use any specific terms but indicates that changes to the curriculum should be documented in an IEP. Finally, New Brunswick uses very explicit and accessible language: “Adjusted Curricular Outcomes.”

Permitting and Restricting the Use of Modifications

There is also considerable variation in policies among the provinces and territories regarding when modifications are permitted. For example, while Ontario permits curriculum modifications from kindergarten to Grade 8 but rarely in secondary school, Saskatchewan *only* permits modifications in secondary school and prohibits their use before Grade 10.

In terms of guidance for when modifications should be considered, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, and New Brunswick’s policy artifacts all offer some parameters for decision making. New Brunswick provides a decision-making rubric along with strong cautionary language regarding the seriousness of the decision. The policy text states:

Making a decision as to whether or not a program should be modified is a difficult and weighty decision that is to be made with the parents/guardians, student, and ESS-team working together. This decision should not be made until there has been a rigorous and comprehensive program of intervention as it can affect post-secondary options. (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2015)

The Ontario MoE does not currently provide any guidance regarding when or how often curriculum modifications should be considered in elementary schools.

Additional Observations

Although my focus was on similarities and differences in modification policies, I also noted key differences that pertain to other entities in the modification ecosystem. For example, New Brunswick provides language that distinguishes between accommodations that are considered part of *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL)—*universal accommodations*, and those that are specifically required for an individual—*justifiable accommodations*. This is interesting

because, as demonstrated in Chapters 4, 7, and 9, there is a debate in the Board as to whether Accommodation-only IEPs are required if a teacher is enacting UDL. Speculation as to how New Brunswick's distinction between the two types of accommodations could reshape Ontario's policy ecology, will be considered in Chapter 9.

Secondly, it was interesting to observe that some examples of modifications in the Alberta policy documents (e.g., extra time on tests, reducing reading level on assignments) are considered *accommodations* in Ontario policy texts. This “difference that matters” will be explored in Chapter 8.

Concluding Thoughts

Taken together, the sections of this chapter begin to render an image of the curriculum modification policy ecosystem, located both locally within the Board, and globally in its broader entanglements. Through situating the policy ecosystem in the broader systemic, historic, geographic, and academic contexts, I hope to have built a case for the necessity of this research and laid a foundation for the chapters that follow. Through diffractive analysis, the image of the ecosystem will continue to sharpen throughout this dissertation as I sketch and re-sketch the entangled apparatuses that produce the enactment of this policy. Though this project's specific rendering of the policy ecology is not meant to be generalized to other contexts, I hope to provide an example of a way of thinking about IEP systems that will facilitate thoughtful and effective reforms.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

The Contours of IEP and Curriculum Modification use in the Board

Policy creates context, but context also precedes policy. (Ball et al., 2012, p. 19)

Understanding the extent of IEP and curriculum modification use in the Board is vital for appreciating the scope, patterns, implications, and significance of this study. In this chapter, I sketch the basic contours of IEPs and curriculum modifications in the Board and then I begin to investigate one of the principal “differences that matters” of this dissertation: the discordance between the intended recipients of curriculum modifications (see Chapter 3) and their pervasive prevalence in the Board. Using descriptive statistics, multinomial logistic regressions, and post-coding analysis, I read the statistical contours of IEP use through the policy apparatuses that produce them.

In Section 4.1, I outline the overall prevalence, distribution, and frequencies of Accommodation-only and Modified IEPs. In Section 4.2, I explore the patterns of initiation and retention of Modified IEPs and examine them through a key apparatus in the IEP ecology that appears and re-appears throughout this dissertation: *The Apparatus of Monolithic Discourses of IEP Protection or Harm*. This apparatus is produced through the entanglement of special education histories, exclusionary hauntings, disproportionality research, the paradox of educational equity (American Educational Research Association, 2016), and the conflation of accommodations and modifications (Chapter 3). I show how these entangled forces have contributed to the patterns of initiation and retention outlined in this chapter, as well as to several binary assumptions regarding *who* benefits from IEPs and *who* does not—assumptions that underly many of the participant comments presented throughout this dissertation, as well as several recent policy shifts in the Board. I conclude the section by calling for a more nuanced and agonistic approach to determining the potential benefit or harm of IEPs for students—one that attends more closely to the appropriateness of Modified IEPs in general.

In Section 4.3, I extend the discussion by questioning the validity and necessity of many of the Modified IEPs in the Board. By diffracting school-based judgements of “below grade-level” performance (i.e., the presence of a Modified IEP) with out-of-school evaluations of student achievement (i.e., results on province-wide standardized tests), I demonstrate that this

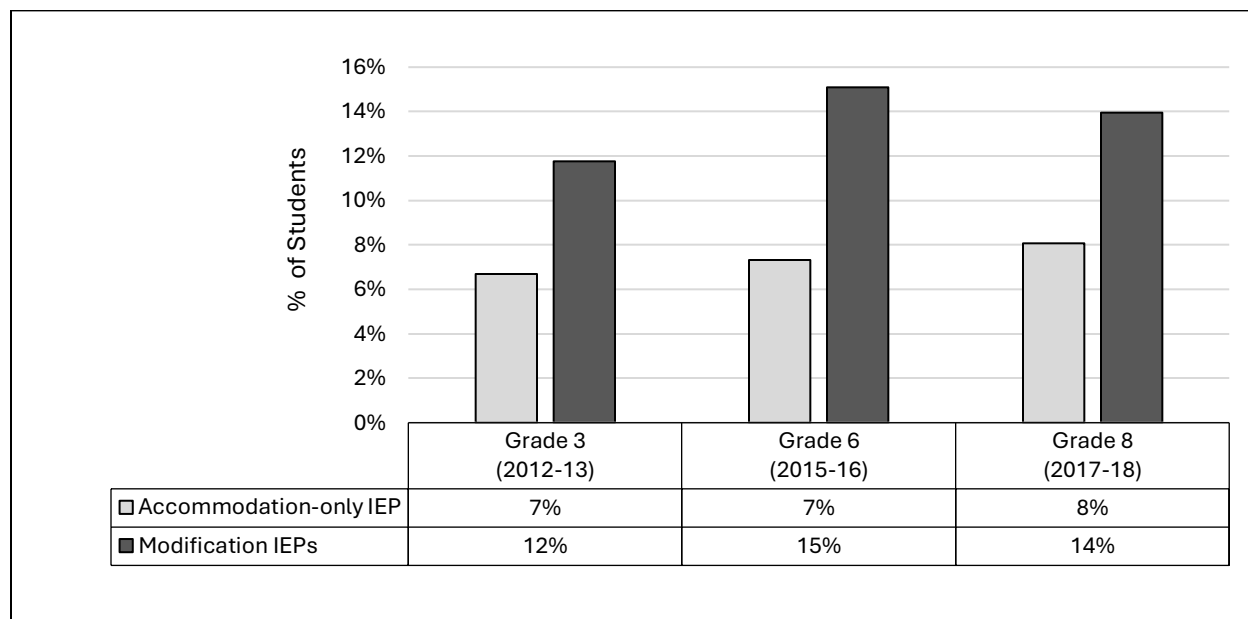
pathway is not necessarily initiated based on student under-achievement but rather questionable perceptions of it. Based on the divergences in evaluations of student achievement, I introduce working definitions of “appropriate” and “inappropriate”³¹ curriculum modifications that will be revisited later in the dissertation. Finally, in Section 4.4, I conclude the chapter with evidence of racial disproportionality among the “inappropriate” Modified IEPs initiated in the junior division. This chapter provides a foundational picture of how IEPs are used in practice, which offers important context for the chapters that follow.

4.1 – Prevalence, Distributions, and Subject Frequencies

By the end of Grade 3, almost 20% of students in this cohort had IEPs. Approximately 7% were Accommodation-only IEPs, and roughly 12% were Modified IEPs. Fewer than 1% of students exclusively followed alternative curriculum expectations as the Board only permits this type of IEP for students in DD-self-contained placements.³² Please note that at this snapshot in time there were no IEPs for students identified with the Gifted exceptionality as gifted testing is conducted in Grade 3 in the Board and therefore only enacted in IEPs beginning in Grade 4. By the end of Grade 6, the frequency of Modified IEPs increased from 12% to 15%, and then decreased slightly to 14% by the end of Grade 8. The prevalence of Accommodation-only IEPs stayed relatively constant around 7-8% (Figure 4.1).

³¹ These working definitions of “appropriate” and “inappropriate” Modified IEPs are revisited in Chapter 11. Until then, I leave the terms in quotations to signal my temporary skepticism and contestation of the term.

³² As explained in Chapter 2, it is important to note that administrative datasets can have imperfections such as entry errors or missing information because the collection of information is primarily for record keeping rather than research.

Figure 4.1*Prevalence of Accommodation-only and Modified IEPs*

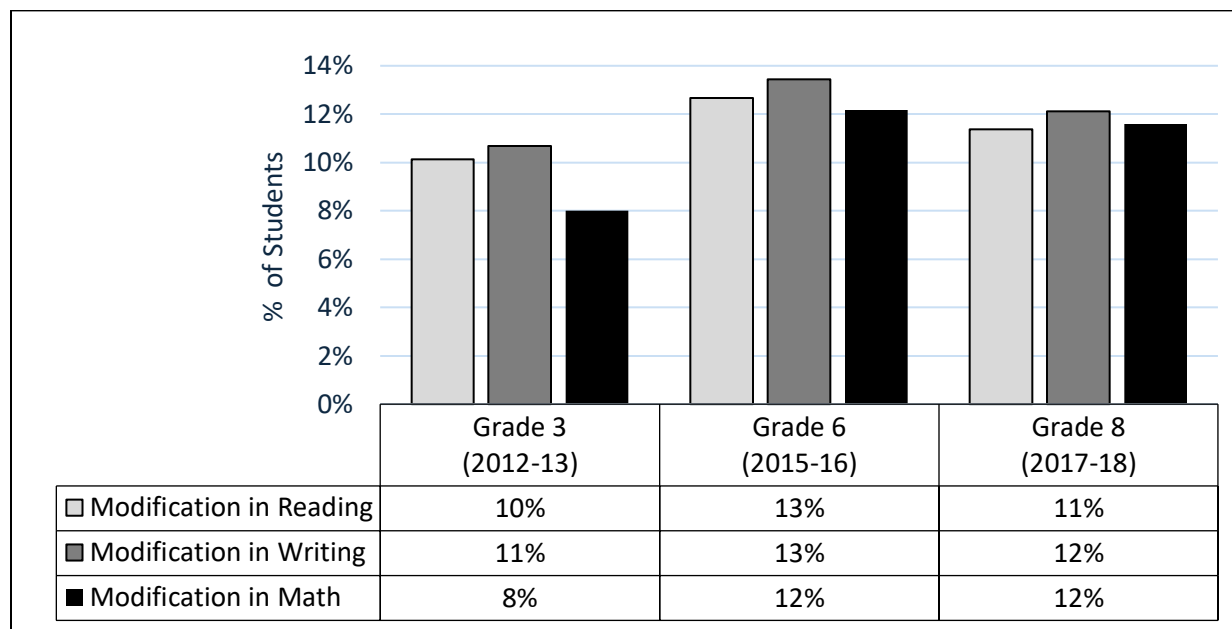
Note. This graph represents the prevalence of IEPs in the 2008-09 cohort at three different points in time.

One of the limitations of cohort data analysis is that it represents a pattern (e.g. proportions of students with IEPs) during discrete snapshots in time. As the education landscape is always evolving in response to changing contexts and policy shifts, that the numbers will likely differ from more recent Grade 3 cohorts.

Modifications by Subject Area

Although students may have curriculum modifications in any or all subject areas, this dataset only included indicators for modifications in Reading, Writing, and Math as they were the subjects where curriculum modifications were most prevalent. By the end of Grade 8,³³ approximately 10-13% of students had Modified IEPs in Reading and Writing, while roughly 8-12% of students had Modified IEPs for Math. Interestingly, the prevalence of Math modifications increased sharply from 8% to 12% in the Junior division (Figure 4.2).

³³ This snapshot of the 2008 Kindergarten Cohort was taken at the end of their Grade 8 year as it marked the end of their time in the elementary panel and an important point of departure as they transition to secondary school. It is important to note that many system variables (e.g., identification, placements) are in a constant state of flux and therefore data can only ever capture a single point in time.

Figure 4.2*Prevalence of Modifications in Reading, Writing, and Math*

Note. This graph represents the prevalence of IEPs by subject area for the 2008-09 cohort at three different points in time.

Often, students have curriculum modifications in several subject areas. At the end of Grade 8, approximately 70% of students with Modified IEPs had modifications in Reading, Writing *and* Math. Roughly 12% had modifications in Reading and Writing but not Math, and roughly 11% had modifications in Math, but not Reading and Writing. Other combinations of subjects occurred less often (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1*Co-Occurrence of Modifications in Three Core Subjects*

Subject Areas with Modifications	Number of Students	Percent of Modified IEPs
Reading, Writing, and Math	1,506	70%
Reading and Writing	250	12%
Reading and Math	9	0.4%
Writing and Math	26	2.6%
Reading alone	10	0.5%
Writing alone	88	4.1%
Math alone	242	11%

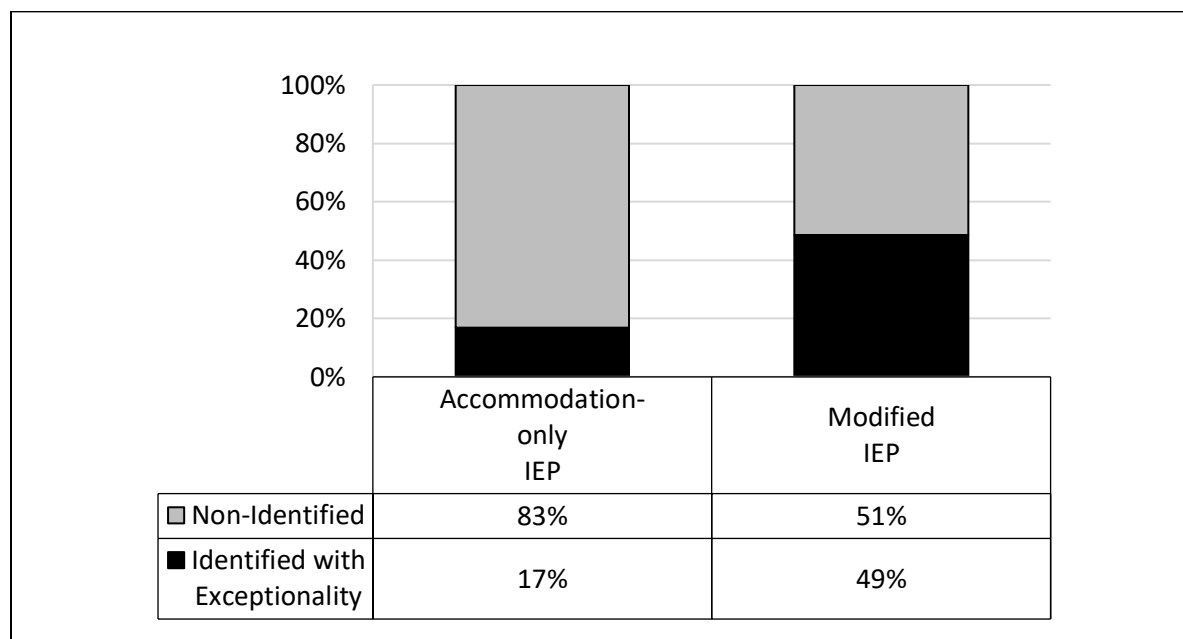
Note. This table presents the frequencies of curriculum modifications in three main subject areas: Reading, Writing, and Math at the end of Grade 8.

Accommodations and Modifications by Identification Status and Placement

Contrary to popular belief, the majority of students with IEPs in the Board have *not* been through a formal IPRC process. In their Grade 8 year, 83% of students with Accommodation-only IEPs were “non-identified” students, and 51% of students with Modified IEPs were “non-identified” (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3

Distribution by Identification



Note. Based on Grade 8 students with Accommodation-only or Modified IEPs in 2017-18.

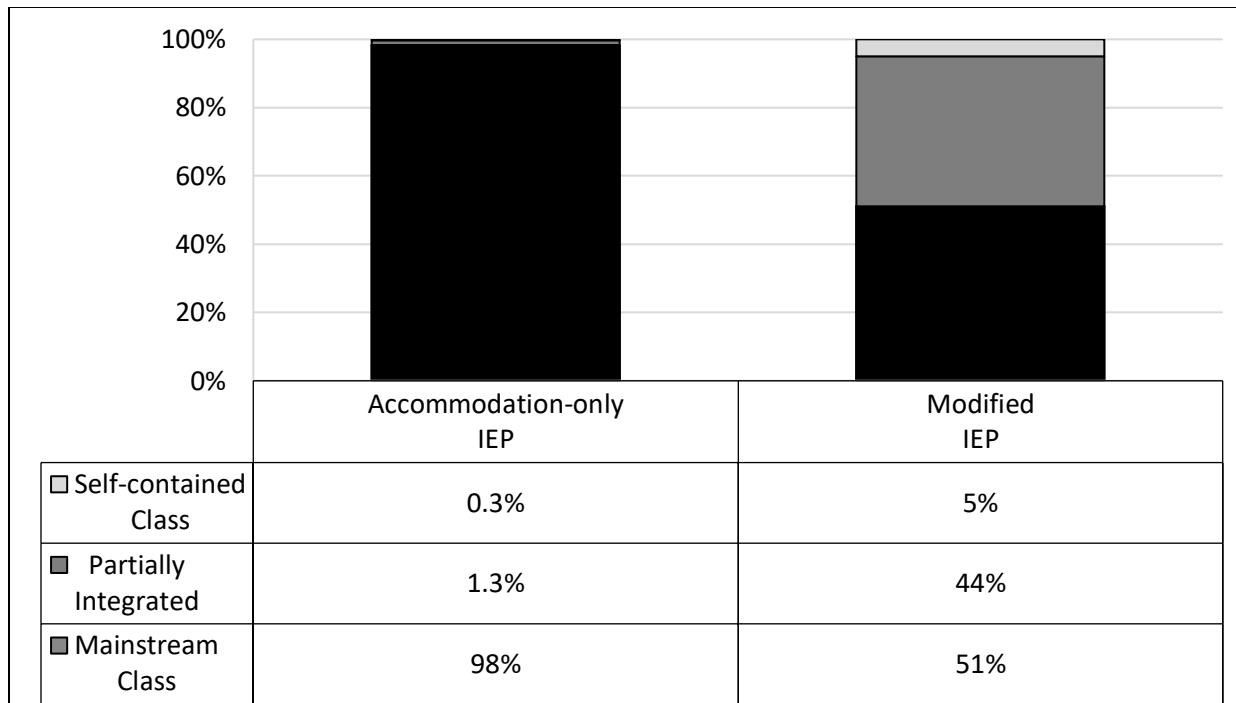
It is likely that *some* of these students have a medical or clinical diagnosis of a disability, but information about diagnosis is not always disclosed to schools and was not included in this dataset.

In terms of placement, as of their Grade 8 year, almost all of the students with Accommodation-only IEPs (98%) were taught in a mainstream classroom. Very few (0.3%) students with Accommodation-only IEPs were educated in full time special education classes. Over half of Grade 8 students with Modified IEPs were educated in regular mainstream classes, and only 5% of all students with curriculum modifications were in full time special education programs. Approximately 44% of students with Modified IEPs were in a “special education class with partial integration” (or *partially integrated*) which is when students are in self-contained special education classrooms for approximately 50% of the day, but are integrated into a regular

class for at least one period a day (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004a, 2017). In the Board, at this snapshot in time, the *partially integrated placement* was a half-time self-contained special education class where most of the students spent roughly 50% of their day (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4

Distributions by Placement



Note. Based on Grade 8 students with Accommodation-only or Modified IEPs in 2017-18.

In 2017, the Board began phasing out the half-time special education classes, which was completed by 2021-22 (Salmon, et al., 2023). The prevalence of Modified IEPs in mainstream classes is therefore likely to be much higher for cohorts after this policy shift.

The key takeaways from this section are that Modified IEPs are more common than Accommodation-only IEPs, most students with Modified IEPs have not been through the IPRC process and do not necessarily have a medical or clinical diagnosis of a disability, and most students with Modified IEPs are educated in the mainstream classroom. Overall, these observations indicate that the use (or misuse) of Modified IEPs presents a system-wide issue within general education that impacts thousands of students across cohorts. Positioning it as a special education issue would obscure its broader significance across the education ecosystem.

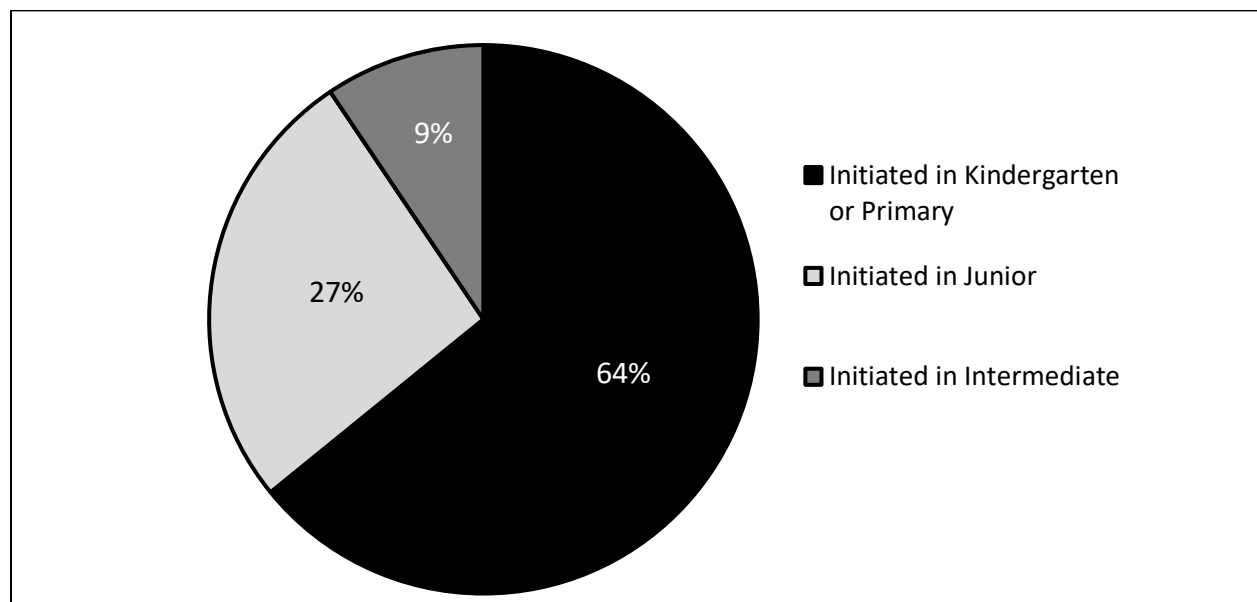
4.2 – The Initiation and Retention of Curriculum Modifications

There is a peculiar apparatus that produces a phenomenon where it is both difficult to obtain the protection of an IEP but simultaneously difficult to end the harm of it. In this section, I provide descriptive statistics to sketch the patterns of initiation and retention of Modified IEPs in the Board, then I introduce *The Apparatus of Monolithic Discourses of IEP Protection or Harm*—a key apparatus in the IEP ecology that appears throughout this dissertation. This apparatus is produced through the entanglement of special education histories, exclusionary hauntings, disproportionality research, the paradox of educational equity (American Educational Research Association, 2016), and the conflation of accommodations and modifications (Chapter 3). These monolithic discourses have shaped several recent policy shifts in the Board which, as I explain below, may result in unintended consequences.

The Initiation of Modified IEPs

One of the difficulties of a longitudinal analysis involving school board datasets is missing information due to students moving in and out of the board every year. The Board has a particularly high mobility rate which presented some challenges for this analysis. I therefore use two approaches to examine the initiation of Modified IEPs. First, I examine students who were enrolled in the Board for Grades 3, 6, and 8. Then, I zoom out to see the larger patterns among all students in the cohort.

Of the Grade 8 students with Modified IEPs who were also enrolled in the Board in Grades 6 and 3 ($n = 1,835$), at least 64% were put on a modified program in kindergarten or the primary division (JK-Grade 3). Approximately 27% started on a modified program when they were in the junior division (Grades 4-6) and roughly 9% while in the intermediate division (Grades 7 and 8). Taken together, over 90% of these students—students who entered secondary school without completing the Grade 8 curriculum—were set on that trajectory before Grade 6, and for most (64%), before they had even finished Grade 3 (Figure 4.5).

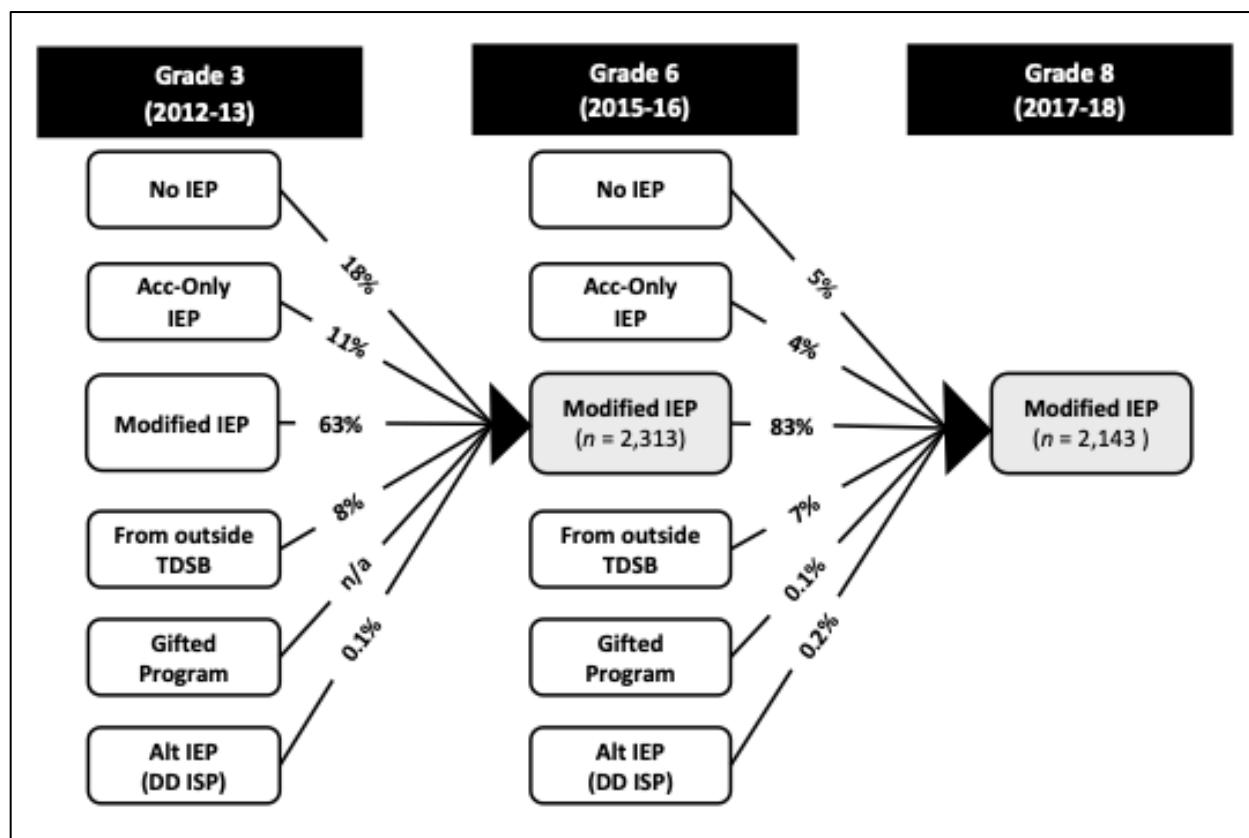
Figure 4.5*Initiation Points of Grade 8 Modified IEPs*

Note. Based on students enrolled in the Board in Grades 3, 6, and 8 ($n = 1,835$).

Now zooming out to examine the wider cohort (i.e., not restricting the analysis to students in the Board for Grade 3, 6, and 8) offers a more detailed view of the permanency of curriculum modifications and the pathways towards a Modified IEP. Of the students with modifications by the end of Grade 8 ($n = 2,143$), the vast majority, 83%, had been carried over from the junior division. Of the students with Modified IEPs in Grade 6 ($n = 2,313$), 63% were carried over from the primary division, and 29% were newly initiated sometime in the junior division—11% from an Accommodation-only IEPs in primary, and 18% from no IEP in primary (Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6

Pathways Towards the Initiation of Modified IEPs in Junior and Intermediate Divisions



Note. This graphic is to be read from right to left. The grey box in the Grade 8 column indicates the number of students on a Modified IEP in Grade 8. The column to the left of it (Grade 6 column) shows the IEP status of those students when they were in Grade 6. Similarly, the grey box in the Grade 6 column indicates the number of students with Modified IEPs in Grade 6. The column to the left of that shows the IEP status of those students when they were in Grade 3. The percentages of each set of arrows total approximately 100%.

Overall, this data shows that while a high proportion of Modified IEPs were initiated in the primary division, a significant proportion (almost 30%) were initiated in the junior divisions.³⁴ Since the Board has already implemented efforts to reduce IEPs in the younger grades, this data suggests that the initiation of Modified IEPs in the junior division is an important area for further exploration (Sections 4.3 and 4.4).

³⁴ It is important to note that an additional 7-8% of new Modified IEPs in the junior and intermediate divisions were for students coming from outside the Board. It was not possible to see in the dataset if they students came with IEPs from their previous school system or if they were new initiations.

The Retention of Modified IEPs

Many administrators, consultants, and SSELs expressed concern that once curriculum modifications were initiated, students rarely return to the standard curriculum. As one SSEL observed, students in her school rarely gained ground when on a Modified IEP. She reported that “when they get to Grade 8, they're still sitting at like a kindergarten IEP!” (Laura, SSEL). Another participant lamented, “One of my biggest pet peeves is when we jump too quickly to modifications for students. Putting them on that IEP that sticks with them, it seems like, until they walk out the door of their Grade 12 graduation” (Nancy, Inclusion Consultant).

Ostensibly, the IEP is a “living” document, meaning that it can and should be updated regularly as the student progresses (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004a). In practice, as the Grade 3 teacher in the section above described, its ongoing maintenance is very difficult for teachers to manage in busy classrooms with so many competing demands (Chapter 9). The following excerpt from a focus group with two administrators illustrates the infrequency of students being taken off Modified IEPs:

Moderator: Do you know of any students on Modified IEPs who have come off of them?

Kimberly (Administrator): So, I've had two this year and it was nice to experience that. The parents are advocating, saying, "I'm seeing [my child] able to perform this work at home. Please have the teacher... be more accountable in terms of assessing the child."

Moderator: Okay. But that was initiated by the parents?

Kimberly (Administrator): It was initiated by the parents, yeah. And teachers were agreeing. Yes, we're seeing those small goals have been met and they are able to work at a, you know, at-at-at-at-at um, Ontario standards. Or they're like a B, B minus. They're not head and shoulders above, but, yeah, I have two this year.

Victor (Administrator): I've seen it in other schools. I haven't seen it at our school... I think it's a small percentage. I don't think it's a large percentage... I think you need a really, really talented teacher to really balance all the things going on in the classroom and to ensure that the IEP is a living document that's evolving in real-time as opposed to periodically, and as students achieve their modifications, they're being reevaluated, and the IEP is being updated.

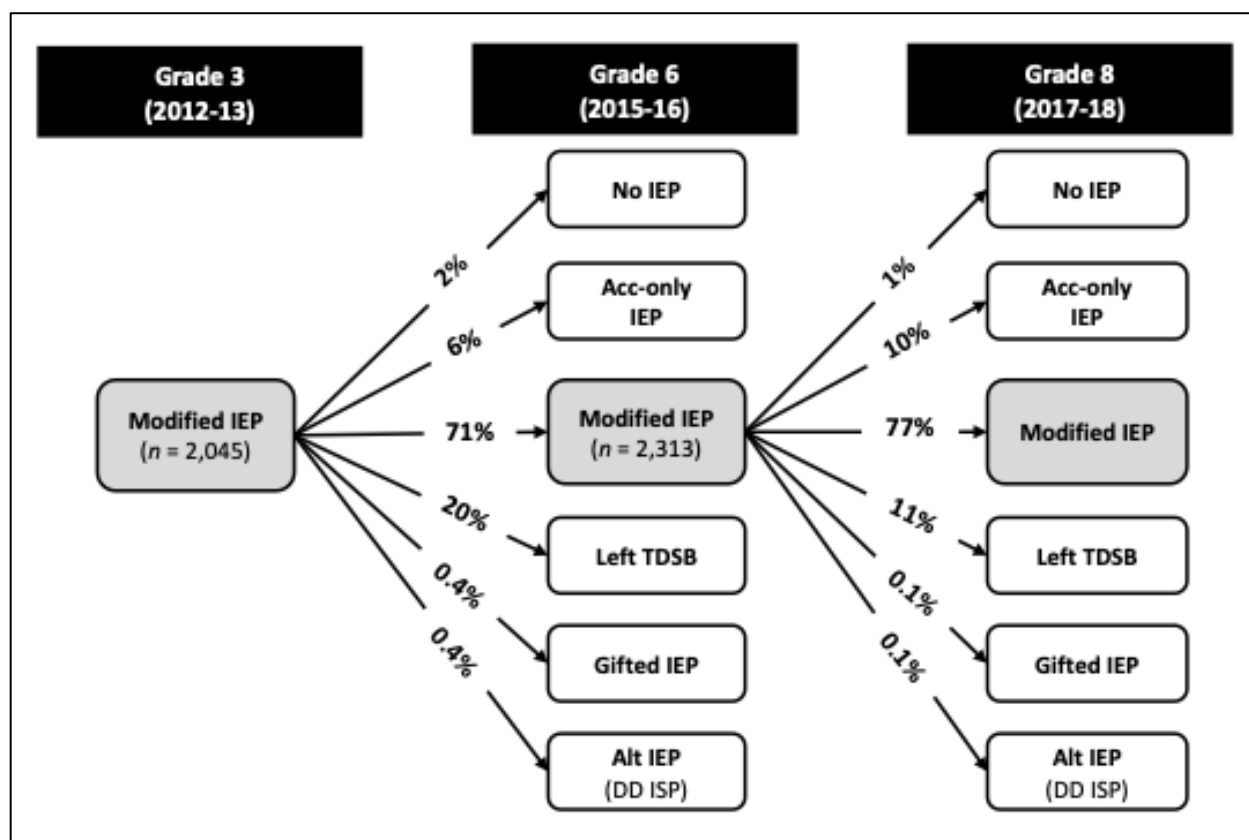
Kimberly (Administrator): Yeah.

Victor (Administrator): ... You need a really talented teacher to be able to do that.

The infrequency of students returning to the standard curriculum was also reflected in the quantitative data. Of the students with modifications in Grade 3 ($n = 2,045$), at least 71% retained them through the junior grades. Only 8% returned to the regular curriculum between Grades 3 and 6. Of the students with Modified IEPs in Grade 6 ($n = 2,313$), at least 77% retained them through the intermediate grades. Only approximately 11% of students with Modified IEPs returned to the regular curriculum in the intermediate grades³⁵ (Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7

Distribution of Exit Points from Modified IEPs



Note. The grey box in the Grade 3 column indicates the number of students on a Modified IEP in Grade 3. The numbers to the right of it represents their status as of the end of Grade 6. Similarly, the grey box in the Grade 6 column indicates the number of students with Modified IEPs in Grade 6 and the numbers to the right represent their status by the end of Grade 8. The percentages of each set of arrows total approximately 100%.

³⁵ The dataset cannot show what happened to students who leave the Board (20% of students with Modified IEPs in Grade 3, 11% of students with Modified IEPs in Grade 6), therefore the percentages of students who retain them and students who return to the regular program are underestimates when considering the whole cohort.

Interestingly, in the focus group excerpt above, it was the administrator in the mid-high SES school community who had witnessed students coming off of their Modified IEPs (at the parents' request), while the administrator in the low-SES school community had not. A socio-economic pattern was also suggested in other focus group discussions signifying that a geographic analysis of Modified IEP retention might offer insights into how modification might be experienced differently across socio-economic groups—a critical dynamic that will be discussed in Chapters 10 and 11, and an important area for future research.

Overall, this data demonstrates that once a student's curriculum is modified, they will likely stay on a modified program until they “transfer” (not “graduate”) to secondary school. As described in Chapter 3, a study conducted as part of the Critical Transitions Project found that approximately 60% of students with curriculum modifications in this cohort transitioned to non-academic streams in Grade 9 (K. Barron, Kim, et al., 2024) where modification was achieved through the *Applied* and *Locally Developed* courses' curricula. Now, in a de-streamed context, it is not yet known how students with curriculum modifications in the elementary panel fare after they transition to the secondary context—another important area for future research.

Monolithic Discourses, Conflation, and the Impacts on IEP Policies

Many participants in this study referred to IEPs in the aggregate rather than distinguishing between Accommodation-only and Modified IEPs—a conflation with material consequences. Many of the comments about IEPs were also saturated with discourses that positioned IEPs as *either* “good” or “bad,” “helpful” or “harmful.” These monolithic, polarized discourses, deeply entangled with histories, research, policies, practices, and perceptions, consistently emerged as powerful forces in many (if not all) of the apparatuses in the curriculum modification ecosystem. However, the discourses of harm and benefit were not always evenly distributed; they intra-acted with two additional conceptual forces—the duality of disability (Artiles et al., 2016) and the paradox of educational equity (American Educational Research Association, 2016)—to produce generalizations about *who* benefits from special education and who does not. First, Artiles, Dorn, and Bal (2016) describe the dual nature of disability. They argue that with the passage of modern human rights laws, disability can be “an identity that affords entitlements, programs, and benefits” but it can also have “stigmatizing consequences” and “be a conduit for exclusion” (p. 777-778). In other words, the presence of disability can give rise to both protection *and* discrimination. The same might be said for involvement with special

education, and for IEPs in general. However, this duality was rarely recognized in the monolithic discourses that emerged throughout this study. Similarly, Alfredo Artiles also describes *the paradox of educational equity*: “how equity remedies for one group—students with disabilities—can create injustices for another oppressed group—racial minorities—and thus push both of them to what philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes as the ‘frontiers of justice’” (American Educational Research Association, 2016, 0:16).

The combined application of these two concepts often leads to dichotomized assumptions of who benefits from “IEPs” in general (without attention to sub-type) and special education more broadly, and who is harmed by them. For some participants, it was evident that the line was drawn along disability status, assuming that students *with disabilities* would benefit, but students *without disabilities* whose underperformance can be explained by other factors would not. For other participants, the divide was drawn along lines of race and class, with *racially, ethnically, socio-economically and linguistically privileged* students benefiting from IEPs, but not *minoritized* students. The tensions around these assumptions, particularly how to navigate intersectional identities, were pervasive throughout this study and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 10. For now, what is important to note is that oversimplified, monolithic discourses of IEPs consistently emerged as powerful forces in many of the apparatuses in the curriculum modification ecology. Outlined below is their relationship with IEP policies and the production of patterns of initiation and retention of IEPs in the Board.

Discourses of Protection and their Policy Implications

Many participants, particularly teachers and SSELs viewed IEPs as tools of protection—something that their students needed, had a legal right to, and would benefit from. When describing conversations with colleagues who were resistant to initiating IEPs, one SSEL described IEPs as a helpful communication tool: “I’m like, ‘it’s a paper trail because if they pick up and they leave, which some do, then you’re helping out another colleague. You’re helping out the child. You’re helping out the family’” (Laura, SSEL). In one case, a SSEL positioned an IEP as a critically urgent lifeline for a student. She said, “We have had some situations, *emergency situations [emphasized]*, where a child’s come to us from a series of other schools. No one’s put an IEP in place!” (Sharon, SSEL). This framing echoes the foundational purpose of IEPs—a mechanism to guarantee that students receive essential supports and accommodations (Chapter 3).

IEP discourses of protection have influenced many policies and practices, including the process of terminating an IEP. When asked about the infrequency of students coming off curriculum modifications, a Grade 3 teacher responded in terms of terminating an IEP in general, and described it as very challenging and time consuming:

I think in my 17 years I think maybe one came off.... Sometimes that process is even harder [than initiating an IEP], which is my frustration. [It's] so easy to get them on an IEP, but to get them off, it's like you're jumping through loopholes just to prove that they are achieving grade-level without accommodations or modifications. That has been my experience, it's harder to get a child off an IEP, than to put them on an IEP. (Selina, Grade 3 Teacher)

Given the significance of IEPs in safeguarding the rights of disabled students, the process of removing an IEP should be thorough and, consequently, somewhat difficult. For example, it would be highly inappropriate to remove an IEP that protects a student's right to essential accommodations like large print for a visually disabled student, or assistive technology for a physically disabled student. However, this necessary rigor also means that removing the harmful or restrictive elements of IEPs (e.g., "inappropriate" curriculum modifications) is equally difficult. There is therefore a complicated balance between ensuring appropriate supports are available when needed and ensuring their timely removal if the same supports are no longer beneficial to the student.

Discourses of Harm and their Policy Implications

Many participants drew from more negative discourses when talking about IEPs. These discourses were grounded in decades of critical special education research that has provided compelling evidence that IEPs can facilitate systemic oppression due to labeling effects, serving as a gateway to segregated classroom placements, and ineffective special education support, particularly for racially, culturally, and linguistically minoritized students (Waitoller et al., 2010). For many participants, these discourses of harm were corroborated by their own personal and professional experiences of IEPs as being ineffective in supporting student learning, or even as restricting it. As one participant remarked, in many cases "it's just a piece of paper" (Alana, SSEL), or as another reflected, "it was such a disservice" (Selina, Grade 3 Teacher). Most strikingly, one participant likened an IEP to a form of prison, stating that "in our school, we're finding if a student's been given an IEP at a younger grade, then it's like a life sentence" (Laura, SSEL).

Just as IEP discourses of protection have shaped policy and practice, so too have IEP discourses of harm. In response to evidence of a disproportionate number of racialized students on IEPs (type unspecified), the Board introduced two new policies into the policy ecology: the *K-1 IEP Strategy*—a policy that requires principals and superintendents to consult before IEPs are initiated for students in Kindergarten or Grade 1, and the *2-12 IEP Review*—a policy that requires an annual review of IEPs and encourages the termination of IEPs that outline supports that can theoretically be achieved through *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL) (Salmon, et al., 2023). These new policies were introduced to “support interrupting the automaticity of IEP creation for early learners as well as the automaticity of rolling over the need for an IEP from year to year” (Salmon, et al., 2023, p. 7). In many ways, this represents a positive shift, especially from an equity and anti-oppression perspective. Yet, at the same time, it highlights the delicate balance between reducing the harms of IEPs, while preserving the accountability and protections that they can also provide. Similar to the challenges of policies shaped by monolithically positive discourses, those rooted in the monolithically negative discourses risk collapsing the complexities of IEPs and producing unintended consequences.

Although the official messaging around the *K-1 IEP Strategy* and *2-12 IEP Review* policies was that unnecessary IEPs should be reviewed and discontinued, many participants reported that the new policies meant that Accommodation-only IEP were being eliminated completely:

“The [Board] is really asking us not to create Accommodated IEPs.” (Alana, SSEL)

“That's why we're trying to get rid of Accommodated IEPs.” (Laura, SSEL)

“The landscape has shifted so much. The number of times that I'm hearing principals saying, "Yeah, no, we're not doing an [Accommodated] IEP." Um, obviously for our younger students, we're not doing them.” (Grace, SSEL)

This translation of the new policies was also evident in an email sent to families at one school in October 2022:

Dear Parents/Guardians, I am writing you because the system generated an IEP consultation letter for the 2022-2023 school year for your child *in error*. **The [Board] no longer does IEPs for students that only require accommodations in order to access the curriculum.** Only students who require significantly reduced expectations at a lower grade level [modifications] will have an IEP. Please rest assured that all of the accommodations that are currently being made for your child will continue. The

classroom teacher makes accommodations for any students in need and an IEP is not required for this. Also, if your child requires resource support based on assessments done in September and/or after the first Term [sic] report cards in February, this too will continue. I hope this explains the new special education guidelines. (Personal communication, October 4, 2022, *emphasis in original, **emphasis added***)

Whether this was the intent of the *K-1 IEP Strategy* and the *2-12 IEP Review* policies or mistaken translations of them—a distinction that, from a policy perspective may be irrelevant (Shore & Wright, 2011)—this shift highlights how the entangled apparatuses of monolithic discourses of harm or protection, disproportionality research, and the conflation of accommodations and modifications have produced a phenomena whereby the more protective IEP type—Accommodation-only IEPs, is more difficult to access and retain, while Modified IEPs—arguably the more harmful IEP type for most students, remains difficult to discard.

Reframing the Conversation

Ultimately, monolithic discourses that frame IEPs as either inherently protective or inherently harmful, oversimplify their dual nature and obscure the complexities of practice. This is not to dismiss or diminish either pole of special education debates—both have done so much to advance equity and justice either in the procurement of protective rights through IEPs or through the dismantling of systematic harm. Rather, I question value and necessity of the binary mindsets that inform these polarized debates, and I argue for more specific and nuanced approaches that evaluate IEPs in terms of appropriateness and effectiveness within every student’s specific context. But this is much easier said than done.

One way to avoid oversimplified binary policy shifts is by disaggregating IEP types in special education research, policy making, and everyday conversations, particularly when discussing the long-term retention of IEPs. Discourses that position the enduring need for an IEP as evidence of the harm or the failure of a special education system demonstrate an underlying medical model³⁶ belief that the purpose of the special education system is to “fix” or “remediate” students until involvement with special education until it is no longer needed. In many cases, the very opposite is true: the long-term retention of an IEP, particularly Accommodation-only IEPs,

³⁶ The medical model of disability is an ideology that understands disability “as a disease in need of a cure” (Davis, 2017, p. 8). This should not be conflated with medical treatment itself. Critiques of the medical model of disability are not necessarily critiquing medical treatments, but rather the deficit-based ideology that positions all disability as problems to be cured through medical, clinical, or educational treatment (Withers, 2024).

could reflect a more inclusive model that accepts and protects the necessary supports that reduce barriers to meaningful participation and inclusion. For example, it is not harmful if and Accommodation-only IEP is protecting essential accommodations. Conversely, the enduring need for a Modified IEP may be harmful, if it unnecessarily restricts access to curriculum, reflects the failure of educators to move a student forward in their learning, and/or limits future opportunities.

Yet, this too can be an over-simplification. While it is essential to differentiate between IEP types, such distinctions should not be oversimplified into a binary where accommodations are viewed as inherently positive and modifications as inherently negative. Modifications, as they were intended (Chapter 3) are an essential tool for inclusion for some students (albeit a much smaller percentage than the current rates). What matters most is whether the accommodations and modifications are appropriate, effective, and enabling in relation to the student's context. The challenge, therefore, is to distinguish, but not valorize, one IEP type over another. Instead, we must speak, research, and plan with specificity, and closely attend to the appropriateness and effectiveness of both accommodations and modifications as precisely as possible. In the sections below, I continue to scrutinize Modified IEPs by attempting to distinguish between “appropriate” and “inappropriate” Modified IEPs.

4.3 – Distinguishing Between “Appropriate” and “Inappropriate” Modified IEPs

There is significant variability in educators' understandings of when curriculum modifications should be initiated (Chapters 5-10). As described above, this variation is partly shaped by conflicting IEP discourses, but it also stems from different interpretations of the Ontario Ministry of Education policy texts (Chapter 5), differences in grading practices (Chapter 6), social-emotional-ethical dilemmas (Chapters 7), and the provision or absence of accommodations and interventions (Chapters 8 and 9). Ultimately, these variations result in tremendous inconsistency regarding when and why Modified IEPs are initiated, and consequently an extremely high rate of what might be considered “inappropriate” curriculum modifications.

Defining what constitutes the “appropriate” or “inappropriate” initiation of curriculum modifications would require considerable research, reflection, and dialogue among principal stakeholders and education leaders in the province. As the following chapters show, this binary is not clear cut. However, given the origins of curriculum modification (Chapters 3 and 5), the

potential for negative long-term consequences (Chapter 3), and the more conservative use of modifications in other educational jurisdictions (Chapter 3), I adopt a fairly restrictive working definition of “appropriate” modifications: changing the curriculum for students who are otherwise not able to access it despite high-quality accommodations that are specific to the student’s needs. In other words, students who passed or are passing their grade, even with Ds and Cs, are considered “inappropriate” candidates for curriculum modifications in this study. This working definition will be revisited in Chapters 8, 9, and 11.

In this section, I use descriptive statistics to challenge the necessity and validity of many Modified IEPs by identifying Modified IEPs in the primary and junior divisions that are likely “inappropriate.” This analysis sets the stage for examining patterns of racial disproportionality in new “inappropriate” Modified IEPs in the junior division (Section 4.4).

“Inappropriate” Modified IEPs Initiated in the Primary Division

The prevalence of “inappropriate” modifications was extremely high in Reading, Writing and Math in the primary division. This was determined by examining the students’ scores on the Grade 3 province-wide assessment. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) was established in 1996 during Premier Mike Harris’s education overhaul after the Royal Commission on Learning concluded that system-wide testing was necessary to ensure that all students were “being assessed according to the same yardstick” (Auditor General’s report, p.128). Each year the EQAO administers tests to students in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 in publicly funded schools. These tests are designed to “accurately reflect the provincial curriculum expectations” and claim to provide “valid, consistent and reliable indicators of student achievement” (EQAO, n.d.).

Standardized tests like the EQAO, or “high stakes monsters” as Au (2022, p. xii) calls them, have many limitations and unintended consequences. From an equity standpoint, standardized assessments, with their roots in the eugenics movements and neoliberal accountability agendas, have been criticized for reinforcing systemic inequities through their cultural bias and the promotion of a Eurocentric curriculum (Au, 2022; Dixon-Román, 2017; Jang & Sinclair, 2018). Secondly, many scholars and educators contend that these tests place excessive emphasis on a narrow set of skills and fail to capture a more wholistic view of learning and potential (Kohn, 2020). Furthermore, these exams have been found to cause significant stress for both students and educators (Eizadirad, 2019). Finally, although the EQAO strives to provide

“objective” data about student achievement (Education Quality and Accountability Office, n.d.), I follow many others in arguing that true objectivity in measuring student ability is simply not possible (Schneider & Hutt, 2023).

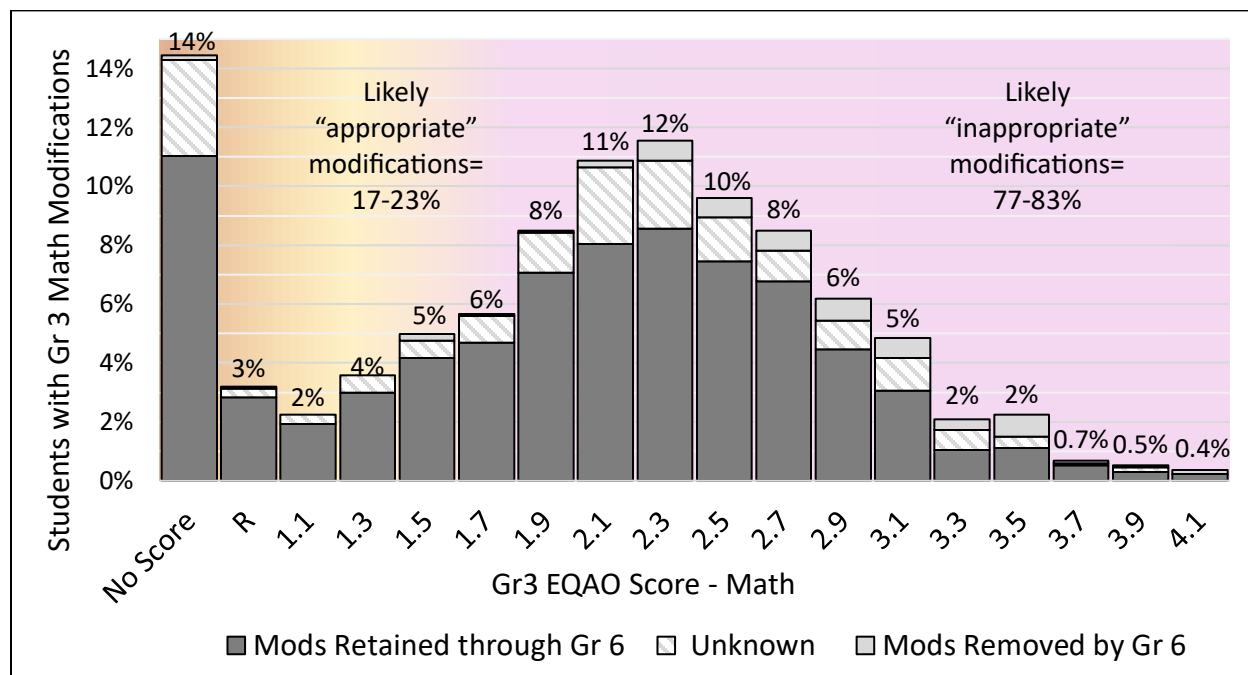
With acknowledgment of these serious pitfalls, I employ EQAO data to help scrutinize school-based perceptions of student ability. In this context, standardized test scores are not seen as rigid, “correct” measures of ability, but as a point of comparison to the schools’ perception that a student requires a Modified IEP. In theory, if curriculum modifications are for students performing below grade level, they should not be able pass the provincial exam, even with appropriate accommodations. Yet, this was only true for approximately 17% of students on Modified IEPs in Math.³⁷

Over 80% of students with Math modifications scored in Level 1 (D’s) or above. In fact, 42% of students on a modified math curriculum performed in the Level 2 range (C’s) and 11% scored in the Level 3 or 4 range (B’s and A’s) (Figure 4.8).

³⁷ Roughly 14% of students answered some questions on the test but did not complete enough questions to register a score (indicated as “no score” in Figure 4.8). It is not possible to know why these students did not answer enough questions to register a score. In some cases, it may be due to academic ability, but in other cases it may be due to willingness or ability to sit for the written test. In some cases, the student may have been absent for a portion of the test. Only 3% of students completed enough of the test to register the score, but did not have enough correct answers to achieve a level 1 standard (indicated as “R” in Figure 4.8).

Figure 4.8

Performance of Students with Grade 3 Math Modifications on Grade 3 Math EQAO

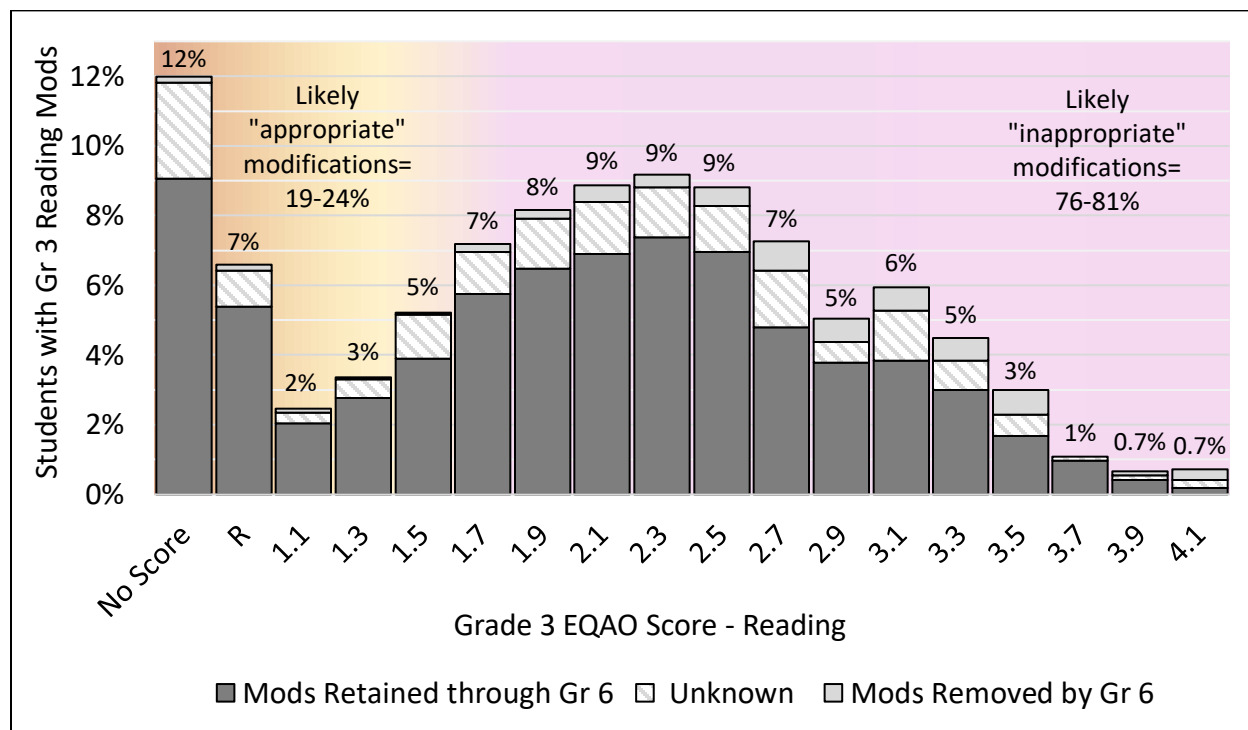


Note. Based on Grade 8 students with IEPs in 2017-18. Excludes students with Gifted or DD exceptionalities. Includes French Immersion students. The % values above each bar represent the percentage of students on a Modified IEP that achieved that score. The dark grey portion of each bar represents the proportion of students at that level who remained on a Modified IEP in Math by Grade 6. The light grey portion represents the proportion of students who returned to the regular curriculum.

Likewise, in Reading, only 19% of students with Modified IEPs were unable to pass the Grade 3 EQAO reading assessment. Almost 40% performed at a Level 2 standard (C's) and 16% performed at a Level 3 or 4 (B's and A's) (Figure 4.9).

Figure 4.9

Performance of Students with Grade 3 Reading Modifications on Grade 3 Reading EQAO

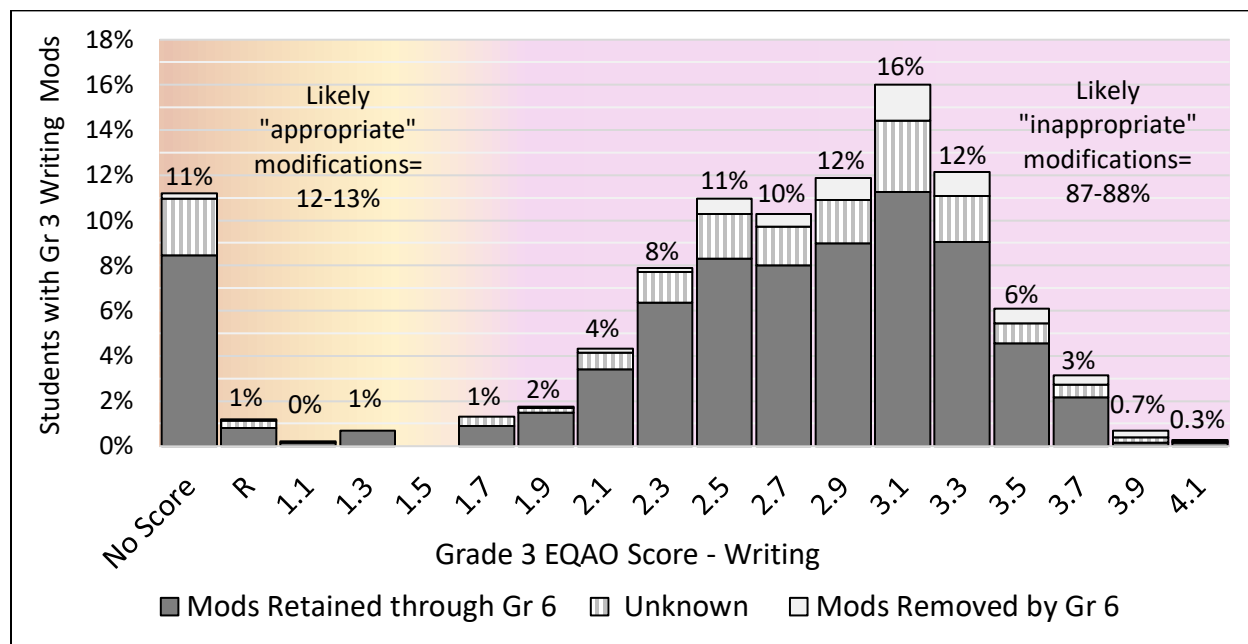


Note. Based on Grade 8 students with IEPs in 2017-18. Excludes students with Gifted or DD exceptionalities. Also excludes French Immersion students as they do not complete the Grade 3 EQAO Reading assessment. The % values above each bar represent the percentage of students on a Modified IEP that achieved that score. The dark grey portion of each bar represents the proportion of students at that level who remained on a Modified IEP in Math by Grade 6. The light grey portion represents the proportion of students who returned to the regular curriculum.

The discrepancies between EQAO performance and school-based perceptions of a student's ability to access curriculum are most notable in Writing. Only 12% of students on a Modified IEP in Writing did not pass the Grade 3 EQAO writing assessment. Over 45% performed in the Level 2 range (C's), and over 38% performed at a Level 3 or 4 (B's and A's) (Figure 4.10).

Figure 4.10

Performance of Students with Grade 3 Writing Modifications on Grade 3 Writing EQAO



Note. Based on Grade 8 students with IEPs in 2017-18. Excludes students with Gifted or DD exceptionalities. Also excludes French Immersion students as they do not complete the Grade 3 EQAO Writing assessment. The % values above each bar represent the percentage of students on a Modified IEP that achieved that score. The dark grey portion of each bar represents the proportion of students at that level who remained on a Modified IEP in Math by Grade 6. The light grey portion represents the proportion of students who returned to the regular curriculum.

Some readers might interpret this data as evidence that curriculum modifications are an effective strategy for closing gaps, rather than evidence of inappropriate initiations. If this were true, students' progress would be monitored, and they would be taken off the modified program. In the figures above, the shades of each bar represent the status of the Modified IEP in that specific subject in Grade 6. The light grey sections on the top indicate the proportion of students whose modified program was removed. The striped sections in the middle indicate students whose Grade 6 Modified IEP status is unknown.³⁸ In all three subject areas, the vast majority of students remained on a modified program despite performing at Levels 2, 3, and 4 on Grade 3 EQAO, which provides strong evidence that these curriculum modifications were not essential for the student to be able to access grade-level curriculum. In other words, they were

³⁸ Most of these students left the Board but some transferred to Gifted programs where the nature of the modification is not clear.

“*inappropriate*” Modified IEPs that will likely stay with the students until they transfer to secondary school.

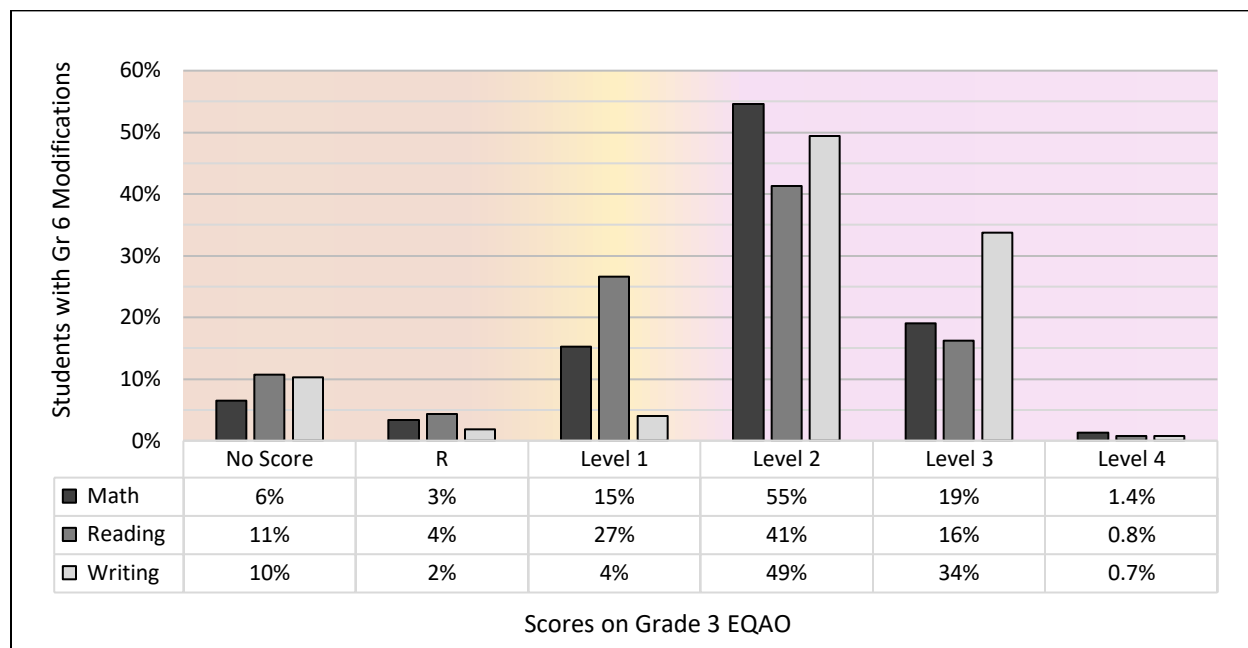
“Inappropriate” Modified IEPs Initiated in the Junior Division

Nearly 30% of Modified IEPs in Grade 6 were initiated while the student was in the junior division (see Figure 4.6 above). That rate is likely higher for more recent cohorts as a result of the *K-1 IEP Strategy*. Taken together, this makes the junior grades a key time of interest in terms of Modified-IEP initiations. This point in time is also compelling because data reflecting student performance *prior* to the decision to modify (e.g., Grade 3 EQAO) can be retrieved and controlled.

Similar to the data from the primary division, the vast majority of students who were put on a Modified IEP by Grade 6 passed their EQAO assessment in the same subject area in Grade 3. In Math, over 90% of these students, passed with 15% performing at Level 1 (D), 55% at Level 2 (C), 19% at Level 3 (B), and 1% at Level 4 (A). Approximately 85% of students who went on to have a Modified IEP in Reading in Grade 6, passed EQAO when they were in Grade 3, 27% at Level 1 (D), 41% at Level 2 (C), 16% at Level 3 (B), and almost 1% at Level 4 (A). Finally, roughly 88% of students who went on to have a Modified IEP in Grade 6 Writing, passed EQAO when they were in Grade 3, with 4% at Level 1 (D), 49% at Level 2 (C), 34% at Level 3 (B), and almost 1% at Level 4 (A) (Figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11

Grade 3 EQAO Performance of Students who went on to have Modified Curricula in Grade 6



Note. Based on students enrolled in the Board in Grades 3 and 6 who had Modified IEPs initiated while they were in the junior division. Excludes students with Gifted or DD exceptionalities. French Immersion students are included in the Math analysis but excluded from the Reading ($n = 9$) and Writing ($n = 11$) analyses because they did not complete the Grade 3 EQAO assessments in Language.

It is not possible to know exactly what happened in Grades 4, 5, and 6 to warrant the initiation of curriculum modifications. Perhaps in some cases there was a steep decline in student performance. However, given the sheer number of students who were put on a Modified IEP by Grade 6 despite previously demonstrating academic success in Grade 3, combined with evidence of a pattern of pervasive “inappropriate” Modified IEPs in the primary division, this data suggests that many of the Modified IEPs initiated in the junior division are also “inappropriate” and something about this policy is not working as intended.

This data further demonstrates the pervasive enactment of the curriculum modification policy for students performing at the Level 2 (C) or Level 3 (B) levels, which far exceeds the original purpose of curriculum modification—a tool for the inclusion of students with significant disability, previously excluded from participation (Chapter 3). Reasons for this

discrepancy will be described in detail in the chapters that follow, but first, it is important to investigate who is most likely to be put on an “inappropriate” Modified IEP in the junior division.

4.4 – Racial Disproportionality in “Inappropriate” Modified IEPs in the Junior Division

While “inappropriate” referrals are harmful for all students, disparities in their rates across groups indicate systemic inequities that disproportionately affect some populations more than others, indicating a specific mechanism for systemic oppression. While the ultimate goal is to eliminate “inappropriate” curriculum modifications altogether, paying attention to disproportionality matters because it helps reveal underlying biases and factors that lead to the stratified enactment of this policy.

In the following analysis, I investigate patterns of racial disproportionality by zooming in on students who performed at or above Level 2 on their Grade 3 EQAO but went on to have a Modified IEP in that same subject by Grade 6—in other words, initiations of “inappropriate” Modified IEPs. Even though students who performed at Level 1 (D) on the Grade 3 EQAO technically passed, they are excluded from this analysis because their performance was somewhat borderline. Students identified with Developmental Disability or Gifted exceptionalities are also excluded as per the reasons outlined in Chapter 2. French immersion students are included in the Math analysis but excluded from the Reading and Writing analyses as they did not complete the language portion of the Grade 3 EQAO test and therefore did not have an out-of-school measure of performance predating the decision to initiate modifications.

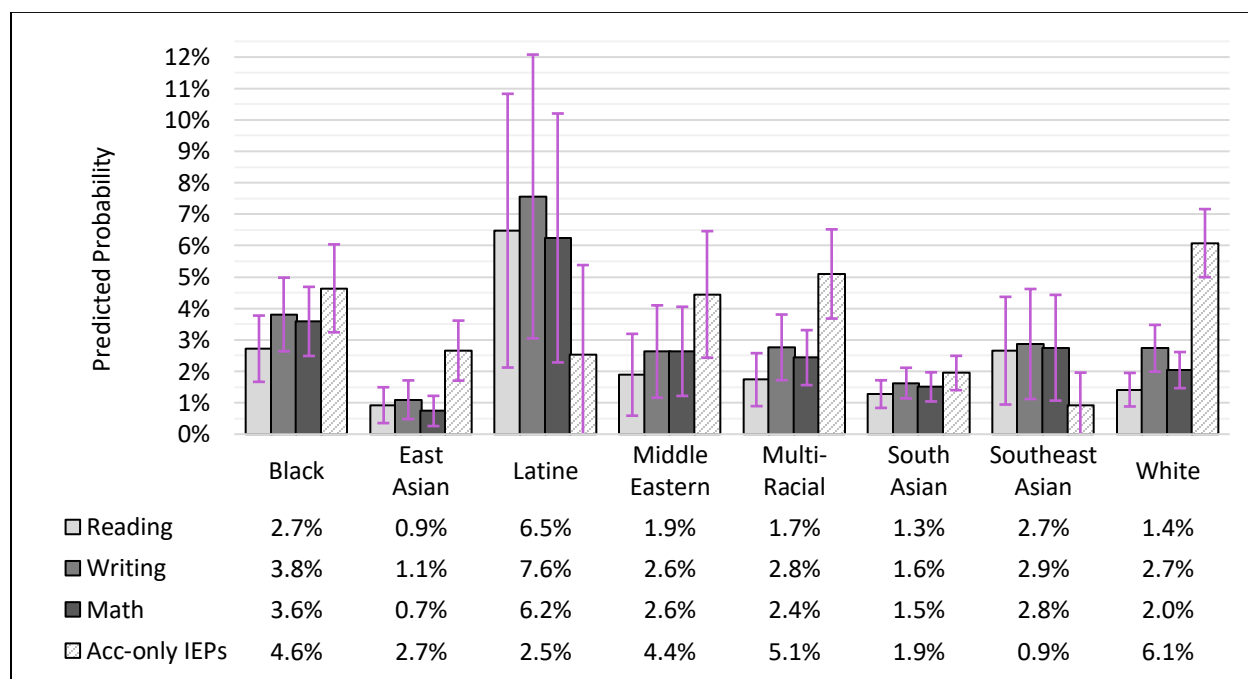
As outlined in Chapter 2, I present the results in predicted probabilities below, based on four multinomial logistic regressions presented in Appendix E. I use predicted probabilities rather than the more common regression coefficients (e.g., log odds, odds ratios, relative risk ratios) for two reasons. First, predicted probabilities are easier to interpret than regression coefficients, especially for readers without extensive experience with quantitative analysis. Second, predicted probabilities are presented on an absolute probability scale (0-1) which does not require the results to be framed in relation to a single reference group. This avoids some of the equity concerns that arise when one group is treated as the baseline for comparison (e.g., historically dominant groups such as white males) (Gillborn, 2010; Johfre & Freese, 2021).

After controlling for gender and neighbourhood income, the results show that Latine³⁹ students had the highest probability of starting an “inappropriate” Modified IEP in all three subject areas with 6.5% in Reading, 7.6% in Writing, and 6.2% in Math. Black students also had higher than average probabilities, particularly in Writing (3.8%) and Math (3.6%). East Asian students had the lowest probabilities in all three subject areas. The differences between groups are significant with Latine students almost 8 times more likely to be “inappropriately” placed on a modified curriculum in Math compared to East Asian students (Figure 4.12).

The results for the Accommodation-only IEPs need a slightly different interpretation as it is not possible to determine if these accommodations are “appropriate” or “inappropriate”. Theoretically, a student may require (and have a right to) accommodations regardless of their current performance in school. The interpretation of these results should therefore focus on each group’s access to accommodations relative to being placed on a Modified IEP.

Figure 4.12

Probability of Starting a new Accommodation-only IEP or new “Inappropriate” Modified IEP in the Junior Division by Race/Racism



Note. Based on four multinomial logistic regression models (see Appendix E). All models control for neighbourhood income and gender. It is not possible to determine if the Accommodation-only IEPs are “appropriate” or not. This data therefore represents the initiation rates of

³⁹ It should be noted that students or parents indicated “Latinx” rather than on the student census.

Accommodation-only IEPs for students who performed Level 2+ on Grade 3 EQAO in Reading, Writing and Math for the purpose of comparison to students performing at the same level, who were put on “inappropriate” Modified IEPs. The pink lines indicate confidence intervals.

Results indicated that white students had the highest predicted probability (6.1%) of accessing accommodations, while Southeast Asian students have the lowest (0.9%). White students were also significantly more likely to be put on an Accommodation-only IEP than an “inappropriate” Modified IEP, as were East Asian and Multi-racial⁴⁰ students. Conversely, Latine and Southeast Asian students were much more likely to be put on an “inappropriate” Modified IEP than an Accommodation-only IEP. Some explanations for these discrepancies will be offered in the chapters that follow as well as in Chapter 10, but future research in this area is warranted.

Even though the percentages for almost every group may seem low, when considering the long-term implications of curriculum modifications, the “inappropriate” enactment of this policy is consequential for hundreds of students in every cohort and thousands of students collectively across the Board. While the ultimate goal should be to eliminate all “inappropriate” Modified IEPs, addressing disparities between groups is also essential in creating more equitable systems.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, I have outlined contours of IEP and curriculum modification use in the Board, which provides a foundational picture for the remaining chapters. Through my analysis I argue that Modified IEPs are not only prevalent but deeply entangled with monolithic discourses, critical education research, and policy shifts. By operationalizing working definitions of “appropriate” and “inappropriate” curriculum modifications, I raise questions about the necessity and validity of many Modified IEPs in the Board—questions that will be revisited in the remaining chapters. Additionally, the evidence of racial disproportionality among “inappropriate” Modified IEPs initiated in the junior division underscores the equity concerns at the heart of this study. Taken together, these observations highlight how curriculum modifications function as a consequential systemic mechanism that extends far beyond providing individual support for students. This first analysis sets the stage for deeper levels of analysis and descriptions of the many entangled apparatuses of this policy ecosystem in the chapters that follow.

⁴⁰ The term “Multi-racial” is used here, however “Mixed race” was the term that students or families selected on the Board’s census at the time.

Chapter 5: Results and Discussion

Curriculum, Evaluation, IEP Policies, and the Apparatus of Mistaken Failures

At any moment in time, schools have hundreds of policies in circulation, albeit of different status and reach.... Most of these never make an appearance in education policy research and yet in different ways they frame, constrain and enable the possibilities of teaching and learning, of order and organisation, of social relations and the management of problems and crises. (Ball et al., 2012, p. 7)

As Ball and colleagues (2012) remind us, “sometimes policies are ‘enacted’ on the basis of confusion” (p. 45). This is most certainly the case in this present study as the curriculum modification policy ecology is marked with as many voids, ghosts, and contradictions as it is directives. In this chapter, I continue to sketch the apparatuses in the curriculum modification policy ecosystem. In Section 5.1, I trace the historic and contemporary apparatuses that produce curriculum policies, evaluation policies, retention/promotion policies, and curriculum modification policies. I show how these entangled apparatuses intra-act to produce a critical void in the ecosystem. In Section 5.2, I outline how this critical void—a *policy vacuum*—is filled with policy ghosts, covert policies, and *de facto policies*, leading to a large-scale misunderstanding regarding when and why curriculum modifications should be initiated—*The Apparatus of Mistaken Failures*—which accounts for many of the “inappropriate” Modified IEPs outlined in Chapter 4. In Section 5.3, I begin to explore the effects of this apparatus. Using descriptive statistics, I investigate the relationship between report card grades and curriculum modifications, explaining why so many students are put on Modified IEPs despite passing or even excelling on the equivalent EQAO tests (Chapter 4). I also employ a multinomial logistic regression analysis to identify racial inequities in grading practices that ultimately lead to the disproportionate overrepresentation of some racialized groups on “inappropriate” Modified IEPs.

5.1 – Introducing Curriculum, Evaluation, Pass/Fail, and IEP Policies

Curriculum, evaluation, retention/promotion, and IEP policies are deeply intra-connected and produced through their intra-actions. Briefly, evaluation practices align with the curriculum to measure if established learning objectives are met, which in turn determine the pass/fail status of students and potential IEP decisions. Similarly, IEP decisions are made based on evaluations, which in turn influences curriculum and evaluation methods. Within the education ecosystem,

these apparatuses are inseparable, yet they are often designed as individual pieces that may make sense on their own, but do not necessarily work well together. As Ball and colleagues (2012) write,

Some policies also cluster, to form policy ensembles, inter-related and mutually reinforcing policy sets which can in some instances ‘over-determine’ enactment.... Some collide or overlap, producing contradictions or incoherence or confusion. (Ball et al., 2012, p. 7)

In the curriculum modification ecology, these contradictions, incoherences, and confusions are not merely bureaucratic inconsistencies; they produce another key material-discursive entity—the apparatus of mistaken failures (Section 5.2). But first, it is important to understand the four key apparatuses in their own right before understanding their entangled intra-actions. The four sections below build on the background information in Chapter 3 and continue to lay the foundation for this present chapter as well as those to follow.

1. Curriculum Policies as an Entangled Apparatus

There is a highly polarized debate, within curriculum theory regarding how open or specific a curriculum should be. With an open curriculum (Dewey, 1938), teachers have more flexibility to foster student-driven inquiry, provide differentiated instruction, tailor pedagogy to the school context, and maximize student engagement. This approach also recognizes variation in cognitive readiness and allows for students to reach developmental milestones at their own pace (Piaget, 1954). In *The Process of Education* (1976), Jerome Bruner introduced the concept of a spiraling curriculum as a way to structure learning so that key concepts are revisited in increasingly complex ways over time. This child-centered, developmental approach allows individual students to engage with curriculum expectations at different entry points depending on developmental readiness. Overall, an open curriculum has been thought to promote critical thinking, interdisciplinary connections, and real-world applications. These principles dominated Ontario’s education philosophy from 1975-1997 (Raphael, 1993) and are still evident in many of the curriculum documents used today.

Conversely, a curriculum with very specific expectations provides clear step-by-step pathways towards well-defined learning objectives (Tyler, 1949). This goal-oriented approach is often designed in a linear, sequential way, moving from basic to advanced topics. Within this framework, there is less flexibility, but more consistency across classrooms, schools, and districts—an important tool for ensuring that high-expectations are maintained for all students

across diverse school contexts. This approach is highly visible in Mathematics and some strands of Ontario’s new language curriculum. It is also commonly used in special education programs like the Empower Reading program (Panda et al., 2024).

As with most polarized debates in education, there are pros and cons to both approaches. Some skills lend themselves to a more linear, sequential development (e.g. decoding), while others are more suited to a more flexible inquiry-based approach (e.g., problem solving). Since 1997, Ontario has drawn from both of these theories. This research is not meant to favour one over the other, but rather to describe what happens when (a) educators apply principles from one approach to another, and (b) there is a misalignment between the educators’ approaches to curriculum, evaluation, and special education (Chapter 6).

Ontario’s Language Curriculum (Past and Present)

The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8: Language, 2006, the curriculum used by the participants in this study,⁴¹ was designed to be very broad. The overall expectations were identical from grade to grade, and the “specific” expectations did not outline a clear progression of skills (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1

Example of the Grade-by-Grade Progression of a “Specific” Reading Expectation

Grade 1	1.6 extend understanding of texts by connecting the ideas in them to their own knowledge and experience, to other familiar texts, and to the world around them (p. 39)
Grade 2	1.6 extend understanding of texts by connecting the ideas in them to their own knowledge and experience, to other familiar texts, and to the world around them (p. 53)
Grade 3	1.6 extend understanding of texts by connecting the ideas in them to their own knowledge and experience, to other familiar texts, and to the world around them (p.67)
Grade 4	1.6 extend understanding of texts by connecting the ideas in them to their own knowledge, experience, <i>and insights</i> , to other familiar texts, and to the world around them (p.83)
Grade 5	1.6 extend understanding of texts by connecting the ideas in them to their own knowledge, experience, and insights, to other familiar texts, and to the world around them (p.97)

⁴¹ The interviews and focus groups for this study were conducted in the spring of 2023, shortly before the release of Ontario’s new language curriculum (*The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8: Language, 2023*). The challenges described in participant quotes are in reference to the “old” (2006) language curriculum, however, many of these issues will persist within the “new” (2023) language curriculum.

Grade 6	1.6 extend understanding of texts by connecting, <i>comparing, and contrasting</i> the ideas in them to their own knowledge, experience, and insights, to other familiar texts, and to the world around them (p.112)
Grade 7	1.6 extend understanding of texts, <i>including increasingly complex or difficult texts</i> , by connecting the ideas in them to their own knowledge, experience, and insights, to other familiar texts, and to the world around them (p.128)
Grade 8	1.6 extend understanding of texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, by connecting the ideas in them to their own knowledge, experience, and insights, to other texts, and to the world around them (p.142)

Note. Taken from *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8: Language* (2006). The expectations in the reading comprehension strand (strand C) of the new language curriculum are similar (*The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1–8: Language*, 2023).

The new language curriculum that was introduced in Ontario in 2023, *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8: Language* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023), outlines a much more specific and sequential program for strand B (Foundations of Language: word reading, spelling, morphology, vocabulary, fluency, and language conventions), while strands A (critical thinking, digital literacy, etc.), C (reading comprehension), and D (written composition) remain open.

While an open curriculum offers flexibility in teaching that may be more inclusive for a range of learners, challenges arise when it is combined with evaluation and special education systems that presume standardization.

2. Evaluation and Reporting Policies as Entangled Apparatuses

Evaluation⁴² or “grading” as it is more commonly called, is “the process of judging the quality of student learning on the basis of established performance standards and assigning a value to represent that quality” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023, p. 46). Since their rise in the 1700s, grades have been highly criticized for over-simplifying the complexity of learning, causing psychological harm, and diminishing students’ intrinsic motivation to learn (Kohn, 2020). There is also a substantial body of literature demonstrating significant inconsistencies and subjectivities in teachers’ grading practices (Brookhart et al., 2016). Yet, despite these known

⁴² The terms ‘assessment’ and ‘evaluation’ are often used interchangeably, but ‘assessment’ can also be used as an umbrella term to describe three processes: ‘assessment for learning’ (when educators measure current understandings or performance to inform their instruction), ‘assessment as learning’ (when students monitor and reflect on their own learning), and ‘assessment of learning’ (the measurement of what was learned). The terms ‘grading’ and ‘evaluation’ align with the meaning of ‘assessment of learning’ (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

criticisms, grades are often accepted as objective measures of student ability (Schneider & Hutt, 2014)—a fallacy that can alter a student’s educational trajectory.

Generally, grades have served two core functions: to communicate messages to students, families, fellow teachers, and other institutions about student performance, and to encourage students to behave. Grades have been often used as rewards and punishments for both academic performance and compliance. According to Schneider and Hutt (2014), throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, grades were based on punctuality, hygiene, attitude, participation, effort, and even comportment at chapel. Schools motivated students to perform through monitorial systems like the Lancastrian Method where students were repositioned within the classroom based on their relative standings after every assignment—the top students moving to the front, and less capable or unruly students moving to the back. Success in these highly regimented and competitive environments determined which few would further their education.

With the introduction of mass compulsory schooling in the late 1800s, the purpose of grading changed from local communication to standardized external communication. Post-secondary institutions and employers began considering school-based grades, thereby legitimizing their appearance of uniformity and objectivity. Grading is now one of the most fundamental parts of the education system (Schneider & Hutt, 2014).

As part of the education overhaul of the late 1990s, Ontario made drastic changes to assessment, evaluation, and reporting policies, attempting to standardize grading practices across the province (Wien & Dudley-Marling, 1998). These changes included introducing policies of formative and summative assessment, assessment for/as/of learning, separating behaviour from academics with the introduction of learning skills on the report card, using achievement levels, and introducing criterion-referenced grading, all of which remain in effect today (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). These major policy shifts unfolded against the backdrop of one the most contentious and polarized debates in education from the 1970-2010s: grade retention versus social promotion. Several key aspects of these evaluation policies are described below.

Criterion-Referenced Grading

Growing Success (2010) stipulates that assessment and evaluation of academic performance must be based on the overall expectations of the Ontario curriculum (p. 19). This *criterion-referenced* (sometimes referred to as “standards-based”) system means that student performance is compared to a provincial standard. If the student learns what they are expected to

learn, then they pass, regardless of the performance of the other students in the class or school. This system is similar to swimming lessons, or driver education programs—everyone who meets criteria will pass. In contrast, *norm-referenced* systems are designed to sort students into achievement levels based on a normal distribution, for example, IQ tests and grading “on the curve.” In these systems, it is expected that in every class there will be a few who will excel and a few who will fail (Eisner, 2002).

When Ontario first implemented the criterion-referenced grading policy, Ruth Sutton, an expert panelist in the 1999 TVO professional development series, explained:

The issues around letter grades when we move to a criterion-referenced framework is that we take all our baggage from our norm-referenced past into a new world. What we're trying to do now, as teachers, is to be clear about the outcomes, and say to the students ‘this is what you need to learn, this is what it looks like when you learn it, and if you learn all of this, then you've done your job.’ Which, to me, means, ‘you get your A.’ But sometimes what happens is we gather all this information together and we go ‘Whoa! Either my standards are too low, or this is an odd group of students, but I can't give them As or it might look like I'm not doing my job.’ And so, we just give some of them A's. We adjust the marks so that it looks like we still have standards. *That's norm-referenced thinking in a criterion-referenced world.* (Ontario Ministry of Education & Training, 1999, min. 37:24)

As I will illustrate in Chapter 6, this norm-referenced thinking is a policy ghost that continues to haunt our criterion-referenced world even today.

The Use of Achievement Levels

In a criterion-referenced system achievement levels may be used to describe the student's level of proficiency with the prescribed standards. *Growing Success* (2010) stipulates that student performance should be evaluated according to four *Achievement Levels* containing qualifiers like “limited” (Level 1), “some” (Level 2), “considerable” (Level 3), and “a high degree of” or “thorough” (Level 4). Additionally, teachers may use “R” or “I” to communicate student achievement.⁴³ According to *Growing Success* (2010):

⁴³ Interestingly, the reason for using the letters “R” and “I” as the codes for these categories is not explicitly explained in Ontario's evaluation and reporting policy documents; however, one might infer that “I” *could* stand for “insufficient evidence” as *Growing Success* (2010) instructs that “I” is to be used “to indicate that *insufficient evidence* is available to determine a letter grade or percentage mark” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 42). While the instructions for when to use the letter “R” do not contain any significant words that begin with the letter in *Growing Success* (2010), its predecessor, the *Guide to the Provincial Report Card, Grades 1-8* (1998), does. It states that that “‘R’ / ‘Below 50’ is used for reporting purposes to flag the need for *remediation* and parent involvement” (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, p. 7, *emphasis*

The code “R” represents achievement that falls below level 1 and is used in the evaluation and reporting of student achievement in Grades 1 to 8... Both “R” and marks below 50 per cent signal that additional learning is required before the student begins to achieve success in meeting the subject/grade or course expectations. “R” and percentage marks below 50 per cent indicate the need for the development of strategies to address the student’s specific learning needs in order to support his or her success in learning...For Grades 1 to 10, the code “I” may be used... to indicate that insufficient evidence is available to determine a letter grade or percentage mark. For the report card, teachers will use their professional judgement to determine when the use of “I” is appropriate and in the best interests of the student. (2010, pp. 41–42)

In episode 1 of the TVO professional development series on assessment and evaluation, host Kit Rankin explained,

The new Ontario Curriculum introduces the concept of Levels of Achievement and the provincial standard. One of the challenges of that concept is to develop a common understanding of these levels. What are the criteria that distinguish a high level of performance from one that’s only passable? Both students and teachers need to share that understanding. (TVOntario & Ontario Ministry of Education, 1999, min. 19:55)

As I will demonstrate in Chapter 6, the goal of developing a common understanding of the achievement levels remains elusive.

The Separation of Behaviour from Academic Performance

Another key aspect of criterion-referenced evaluation is that grades should only reflect academic achievement. They should not include aspects like effort, participation, compliance, or punctuality. When the criterion-referenced system was first introduced in Ontario in the late 1990s, it was accompanied by a new standardized report card that provided a separate section for teachers to report on students’ *Learning Skills and Work Habits*, preserving subject specific grades for academic performance alone. *Growing Success* (2010) states:

The development of learning skills and work habits is an integral part of a student’s learning. To the extent possible, however, the evaluation of learning skills and work habits, apart from any that may be included as part of a curriculum expectation in a subject or course, should not be considered in the determination of a student’s grades. Assessing, evaluating, and reporting on the achievement of curriculum expectations and on the demonstration of learning skills and work habits separately allows teachers to provide information to the parents and student that is specific to each of the two areas of achievement. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 10)

added). The inclusion of the word remediation in the 1998 document, but omission in the 2010 document is significant and will be discussed in more detail in Section 5.2.

To this day, Ontario teachers evaluate students' achievement of the same six learning skills introduced in the 1990s, including responsibility, organization, independent work, collaboration, initiative, and self-regulation. As Ken O'Connor, panellist on the TVO professional development series, explained:

The reason why we want grades to only be achievement is so that they have a clear meaning. When we put things like effort and participation in with achievement, we really don't know what the grade means. So, a student might have 75% for Math but if that's a mixture of achievement and behavior we really don't know what it means. (Ontario Ministry of Education & Training, 1999, min 40:05)

Ostensibly, this policy makes sense. In practice, as I demonstrate in Chapter 6, this separation is very difficult to achieve.⁴⁴

The Misalignment between Criterion-Referenced Grading and an Open Curriculum

When the criterion-referenced evaluation system was first introduced in Ontario in the late 1990s, the approach to curriculum was compatible. Every subject area offered precise expectations with clear progressions from grade to grade, which facilitated the criterion-referenced approach to grading. But as Ball and colleagues (2012) remind us,

policy making is inevitably a process of bricolage: a matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere, drawing upon and amending locally tried and tested approaches, cannibalising theories, research, trends and fashions and not infrequently flailing around for anything at all that looks as though it might work. Most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice. (p. 126)

When the Language curriculum was updated in 2006, the curriculum policy pendulum swung back to a more open approach without a new compatible evaluation system. This left the criterion-referenced evaluation system without its most important ingredient: clearly defined standards.

A criterion-based evaluation system without clearly defined standards is like a map without landmarks. The misalignment between the curriculum design and grading policies

⁴⁴ Interestingly, there were some recent policy swings in this area after the 2020 Math curriculum was released. Unlike previous curriculum documents, the new math curriculum includes social-emotional skills such as developing a growth mindset towards Math. After several school boards, including the Board, refused to allow evaluations of these social-emotional skills to be included in students' overall math grades, the MoE released a memo stating that due to emerging research demonstrating that educator bias can influence the evaluation of social-emotional skills, school boards may instruct teachers to pause their evaluations of these skills (Naylor, 2020).

created a system that left many educators feeling lost. When asked “*How do you know what grade-level means?*” many participants responded with uncertainty. One participant hesitantly shared,

I don't-- I don't think-- I think most people will tell you they're not really sure. Um, the teachers that have a lot of experience, I think they're basing it on their experience. Just, you know, I've been a Grade 6 teacher for X number of years, and-and this is what I know. I've seen a range of kids, and this is sort of what I think of as a Level 4. This is what I think of as a Level 1. (Grace, SSEL)

This uncertainty is one of several causes of variability in grading that will be elaborated on in Chapter 6.

Reducing Multiple Grades into One Single Grade

Despite adopting a criterion-referenced system, Ontario educators are paradoxically required to capture students' complex and varied achievements on a diverse set of academic skills into a single grade—a practice that is fundamentally at odds with criterion-based evaluation. As assessment and evaluation expert Thomas Guskey writes,

If someone proposed combining measures of height, weight, diet, and exercise into a single number or mark to represent a person's physical condition, we would consider it laughable. How could the combination of such diverse measures yield anything meaningful? (2011, p. 4)

Ontario policy makers were aware of these conflicting ideologies from the start. Episode 3 of the TVO professional development series showcased the processes of two selected teachers to help viewers learn how to select a grade. These demonstration teachers described their complicated and highly personalized processes of collecting detailed assessment information from a variety of sources and on a wide range of skills, only to simply estimate a single grade in the end.

Converting achievement levels to letter or number grades for report cards (see p. 40 of *Growing Success*) creates a fallacy of precision. This fallacy arises when precise values (e.g., 73% or B-) are assigned to estimates. They imply a level of exactness that simply does not exist. These grades give involved parties a comforting sense of objectivity even though the process is far from it. Decades of grading research has shown the same thing: the relative weighting of each individual skill within a curriculum (e.g., decoding versus making inferences) is at each teacher's discretion and can vary significantly within a single school (Brookhart et al., 2016). As curriculum scholar, Elliot Eisner (2002) wrote,

Thus, we have something of an education irony. Most educators would say that neither grades nor standardized test scores capture the richness of education experience... yet schools do reward students with honors classes and deans' lists based on such grades and therefore legitimize the importance of grades while recognizing their limitations. (p. 188)

Similarly, while most educators recognize that grades are estimates (particularly in the younger divisions), when discussed in a special education context, they are often treated as precise measurements of student ability. As Chapter 6 will demonstrate, how teachers weight different skills in the curriculum when generating report card grades has major implications for determining who passes, who fails, and ultimately who needs a Modified IEP.

3. A Ghostly Apparatus: Grade Retention and Social Promotion Policy Pendulum Swings

As described above, the many policy changes in the late 1990s were set against the backdrop of one of the most contentious and polarized debates in public education: grade retention versus social promotion. A brief overview of this debate is included here, as its ghost (Gordon, 2008) plays an important role in the curriculum modification ecology.

Grade Retention Policies

The practice of "passing" or "failing" students began in the 1860s as schools shifted from multi-level classes to single-grade cohorts (Frey, 2005; Thomas, 2000). This shift was largely driven by a considerable influx of children in schools due to waves of immigration, urbanization, and compulsory schooling mandates. With increasing student populations "graded classrooms" became the dominant format for schools in Ontario and across North America (Ellis, 2019; Frey, 2005). Once graded classrooms became popular, curriculum was divided into levels and students had to prove that they deserved promotion to the next grade level (Owings & Kaplan, 2001).

The rationale behind grade retention ("failing" or "holding a student back") is to give the child another year to solidify their skills before moving onto the next level. However, it has rarely delivered on that promise. More than a hundred years of research has consistently demonstrated a wide variety of negative consequences of the practice, including high dropout rates, and social-emotional harm (Frey, 2005). Studies have shown that adults who were retained in elementary school were significantly less likely to attend post-secondary education when compared to similar low-achieving students who were not retained. Their hourly earnings were lower, and they were more likely to abuse substances and be incarcerated (Frey, 2005). As Jenkins and Weldon (1999) write, "there is ostensibly no other education decision made on behalf of a student that is more far reaching in its impact than grade retention" (p. 311).

Additionally, research has consistently shown that grade-retention is ineffective in improving students' performance. While there may be an initial improvement on performance in the grade that is repeated, the effects almost always disappear by the following year (Jenkins & Weldon, 1999). Finally, from a financial perspective, some reports show that the cost of retaining a student for one year could be as much as three times greater than the cost of providing remediation (Jenkins & Weldon, 1999). Even with this indisputable body of research, grade retention was one of the most persistent, ineffective, and harmful policies in the history of public education.

Social Promotion Policies

Social Promotion is the practice of advancing students to the next grade level regardless of achievement. It began in North America in the 1930s in tandem with increasing concerns over the social and emotional impacts of retention (Thomas, 2000). Social promotion steadily grew in popularity despite critiques that it negatively impacted students' attitudes towards learning as they would pass regardless of their mastery of the material, and that graduating students were not prepared to become responsible citizens and meet the demands of an increasingly complex society. Critics also noted that promoting unprepared students exasperated their gaps and ultimately led to frustration and discouragement. Moreover, parents had a false sense of their children's progress (or lack thereof) and employers were concluding that diplomas were meaningless (Picklo & Christenson, 2005). Yet, with grade retention and social promotion positioned as the only options, a polarized policy pendulum swung back and forth between the two inadequate approaches for decades (Thomas, 2000).

Social promotion became so contentious in the United States that it was a prominent issue in both the 1998 and 1999 State of the Union Addresses (Picklo & Christenson, 2005). In 1999, U.S. President Bill Clinton vowed to end social promotion by requiring that all schools receiving federal funds, eliminate the practice in favour of promotion based on statewide standardized tests (Picklo & Christenson, 2005; Thomas, 2000). He stated, "When we promote a child from grade to grade who hasn't mastered the work, we don't do that child any favors. It is time to end social promotion" (in Frey, 2005, p. 340). For nearly a century, education systems toggled between two ineffective responses to low student achievement, until it was concluded that neither approach could address students' learning needs without the key missing ingredient: appropriate instruction. Scholars wrote,

Neither repeating a grade nor moving on to the next grade level provides students who have skill deficits with the appropriate instruction needed to improve. (Picklo & Christenson, 2005, p. 260)

The main conclusion should be that both policies are failures... The salient issue is not what to adopt (social promotion or retention) but how to provide appropriate instruction given student diversity. (Karweit, 1991 in Jenkins & Weldon, 1999, p. 310)

If we are serious about enabling all students to achieve higher expectations, then we should be willing to invest in the types of programs and instruction that will facilitate their academic achievement and their success. (Jenkins & Weldon, 1999, p. 311)

After reaching this consensus in the early 2000s, this highly polarized debate—one of the most contentious in public education—suddenly went quiet in North America.

Grade Retention and Social Promotion in Ontario

When the standardized curriculum, criterion-referenced grading system, and IEPs were adopted as policies in the late 1990s, grade retention was permitted at the principal's discretion in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education & TVOntario, 2000). This was evident in the provincial report card that included boxes where teachers were to indicate that the student was either "Progressing Well Towards Promotion," "Progressing with Some Difficulty Towards Promotion," and "Promotion at Risk" (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, p. 5). Additionally, teachers were required to indicate on the June report card the grade-level in which the student should enroll in the following year. The *Guide to the Provincial Report Card* instructed teachers to:

Write in the grade in which the student will be registered the following year. If the student is to be retained, the grade will be the same as the student's present grade. If retention is being considered, the school should involve the parents in extensive consultation before any final decisions about placement are made. (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, p. 6)

While the 1998 evaluation and reporting policy explicitly permitted grade retention, its successor, *Growing Success* (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998) makes no mention of either retention or social promotion. In effect, the policy pendulum went from swinging between two polarized poles to ultimately landing in a third destination—a *policy vacuum*.

In policy scholarship, the absence of policies needed to adequately address a pertinent issue is often referred to as a policy vacuum (Khan, 1960; Moor, 2005; Vega, 2024). This concept is a useful analytical tool in policy ecology because it makes absence visible. For example, Vega (2024) used the concept of a policy vacuum to explore how higher education

officials navigated addressing racial conflicts between students in the absence of institutional policy. Moor (2005) used the concept to highlight how changing technologies created policy vacuums that warranted urgent attention. In the present study, *Growing Success* (2010) does not provide any guidance for what to do with students who have failed their grade-level. The specific language to describe “R” (Grades 1-6) or below 50% (Grades 7 and 8) is that “additional learning is required before the student begins to achieve success in meeting the subject/grade or course expectations” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 41). There is no mention of grade retention or social promotion, and there is no directive regarding how this “additional learning” should take place. This policy **vacuum** plays a significant role in the curriculum modification ecosystem and will be taken up in Section 5.2 and again in Chapter 8.

4. Curriculum Modification Policies

The Ontario Ministry of Education’s Curriculum Modification Policy Vacuum

There are very few guidelines from the MoE that indicate when curriculum modifications should be considered—a second key policy vacuum in the ecosystem that will be taken up further in Section 5.2. The *Special Education in Ontario* (2017) document outlines what modifications are, states that they must be documented in an IEP, and directs how to document them, but it does not provide criteria for when or why modifications should be initiated. This high-stakes decision is to be made at the school level:

In preparing an IEP, the in-school team will determine the most suitable program option. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017, p. E19)

[Educators] determine, for every subject or course, the program option that will best suit the student’s needs (i.e., whether the student requires accommodations only or accommodations and modifications) and decide whether alternative programs are needed. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. E9)

The *IEP Resource Guide* (2004a), *Learning for All* (2013), *Ontario Schools – Policy and Program Requirements* (2016), and *Planning for Students with Special Education Needs* (2024) all reiterate the same information.

There is some additional information available for specific exceptionality groups. For example, *PPM8 (PPM8 - Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities, n.d.)* suggests that modifications for students with learning disabilities should only be used *as a* “last resort.”⁴⁵

Modified learning expectations that are drawn from a lower grade level will only be considered if the student cannot demonstrate learning with the aid of any of the approaches and/or strategies described above. (PPM8, 2014)

In contrast, the MoE’s definition of Mild Intellectual Disability (MID) suggests that modifications *should* be used for this exceptionality group:

Mild Intellectual Disability: A learning disorder characterized by... an ability to profit educationally within a regular class with the aid of considerable curriculum modification⁴⁶ and support services. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. E20)

There are no clear guidelines for students in other exceptionality groups or for “unidentified” students, which is currently the largest group of Modified IEP holders in the Board.

The absence of adequate guidelines supporting the initiation of curriculum modifications is another clear example of a policy vacuum—one that created the conditions for two additional policy phenomena explored below: covert policies and *de facto* policies.

Overt and Covert Modification Policies

The Board’s current Special Education Plan (Toronto District School Board, 2024a) reiterates the MoE’s policies but has some additional cautionary language regarding the use of curriculum modifications in the elementary panel:

Some decisions about modifications can impact a student's educational pathway. It is important that there be clear communication between parent(s)/guardian(s)/ caregiver(s) and school staff about the use and impact of modifications. (Toronto District School Board, 2024a, p. 156)

⁴⁵ The use of curriculum modifications as a “last resort” emerged as a common discourse that will be discussed in Chapter 8.

⁴⁶ This definition of MID first appeared in the 1984 *Special Education Handbook* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1984). At the time, the term “curriculum modification” referred to accommodations and modifications to the general program. It did not specifically refer to curriculum modifications as we use the term today. It should also be noted that MID is not a recognized clinical diagnosis. According to Reid and colleagues (2020), it is an educational category adopted by the Ontario Ministry of Education so they could identify students who were struggling to meet academic requirements in the regular classroom. And, as I surmise, distinguish between intellectually disabled students who were deemed “able to profit” from public education and those who were deemed to be “unable to profit by instruction” as per Bill 82 and *Regulation 554/81* (1981)—a “designation which essentially abrogated their right to education in its entirety” (L. Reid et al., 2020, p. 194). The criteria for the MID exceptionality (presented above) does not provide clearly defined criteria which has resulted in tremendous variation in how school boards determine who qualifies for the MID label (Harrison & Holmes, 2014).

Other than this cautionary language, there are no formal, overt, public-facing policies guiding the initiation of curriculum modifications. However, several participants were familiar with an internal policy that specified that *curriculum modifications should only be initiated when a student cannot otherwise **access** the Ontario curriculum despite high quality accommodations as indicated by **two consecutive Rs** on the report card. Several participants used the language of this policy when explaining when modifications should be initiated (noted with emphases).*

From my admin, [and] every admin ever, they have to have *two Rs* [emphasis added] at least, before they would consider modifying their report card is what I've been told.
(Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher)

If they're getting Ds and in that low 50-range, I'm pushing accommodations. I'm working with the teachers to-- you know, they may be on an IEP for accommodations only. That would be fine. But for an actual modification of the curriculum that's a bigger decision. It's always: try out every single accommodation that's possible... And if we don't see progress and they're still at that level... that's when I would start looking at moving to a curriculum modification. (Donna, Administrator)

They're supposed to be failing before you actually modify the grade... They're supposed to be *not accessing* [emphasis added] the grade-level curriculum before you modify.
(Alana, SSEL)

A formal artifact representing this policy (not to mention several other directives discussed in this study) could not be obtained for this research. It appears there are no public-facing artifacts articulating this “two consecutive R” modification policy, and if there are internal documents they are highly restricted. I have been told that this particular policy was articulated in an email sent to special education consultants in 2017 and then spread by word of mouth to SSELs and administrators in schools.

The practice of disseminating policy via word of mouth has been observed in other recent studies conducted in the Board (Shah & Sodhi, 2025; Shah et al., forthcoming). This institutional directive-without-artifact is not the same as an *informal policy*—the unwritten rules that grow organically through an institutional culture or memory (Levinson et al., 2009). Rather, it is an intentional directive that is institutionally mandated and verbally disseminated but not documented—what I call a *covert policy*. This directive-without-artifact may be to avoid scrutiny, evade liability, or retain plausible deniability that it exists. It may be to avoid committing to the rigidity inherent in tangible policy artifacts, or it could be a *shadow policy*—unauthorized policies generated by middle management to circumvent institutional directives by

re-writing them to serve their own interests (B. R. Robinson, 2024), or in this case, perhaps to fill the policy vacuum. Regardless of its intents, this directive, or at least educators' understanding of it, provided clear, actionable guidelines that many educators followed, including myself.

Several participants experienced *knowing* this “two R” policy but not knowing where it came from. A couple participants described searching through Ontario policy documents but not being able to find it. One participant concluded that it must be an old policy that was no longer in effect:

And I've gone through the Growing Success and it's not [there]. It used to be *two Rs* [emphasis added], but that was back when the reporting was different. And when I read in Growing Success-- like, you really shouldn't be modifying the program if they're not failing at grade level. Back in the day, if you had a student that was struggling, you would put some things into place to try and help them before you automatically just modified the program. I mean... you used to have to track it for *two terms* [emphasis added], and students had to be, with all of the interventions, still failing after the second term before you would modify the program. But now I'm finding that's not a thing anymore... We're modifying programs for students who passed with a B last year! (Alana, SSEL)

As helpful as participants found it, the verbal circulation and concealment of this covert policy limited its translation. In effect, this meant that it only partially filled the policy vacuum, resulting in geographically and temporally inconsistent enactments:

I've been all over the place in terms of how many IEPs I've had per year, and depending on admin, who should get an IEP and who shouldn't. That narrative sometimes changes depending on who is there. So that's always been something that has been challenging to navigate, or just trying to figure out what really is, like, who really does need an IEP and the criteria for that. Um, this year it's been a little bit more clear, which is great. Um, sometimes it just depends on who you ask, and you get a different answer every time. (Selena, Grade 3 Teacher)

There's nothing like sort of officially written down. Like every SSEL you talk to is gonna have a different story about how [to enact curriculum modifications] -- and-and every teacher. Like there's no hard and fast [policy]. (Alana, SSEL)

Although this covert policy filled the policy vacuum for some educators, those without access to it filled the void in another way. A *de facto* policy is when non-policy artifacts are adopted as policy as a result of a policy vacuum (Lingard, 2003). As the following section illustrates, the policy vacuums left by the MoE and the Board has led to the adoption of *Growing Success* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) as a *de facto* curriculum modification policy resulting in wide-spread confusion among educators as to when curriculum modifications should be initiated.

As one participant summarized, “There's a lot of ambiguity. There's a lot of subjectivity...It's almost like a perfect storm” (Victor, Administrator).

5.2 – The Apparatus of Mistaken Failures and the Production of “Inappropriate” Modified IEPs

As the old adage goes: nature abhors a vacuum. This refers to Aristotle’s idea that empty space cannot exist because nature will always act to fill it (“Horror Vacui (Philosophy),” 2025). Based on Lingard’s earlier work, Weaver-Hightower (2002) explains that “when formal policy does not exist, practitioners look to other sources, such as popular books or advocacy-style reports, to solve the problems they face” (p. 158). These de facto policies can be “pivotal to the workings of many policy ecologies” (p. 158), which is especially true in the curriculum modification ecosystem. In this section, I describe how two policy vacuums—the *When-to-Initiate-Curriculum-Modification Policy Vacuum* and the *What-to-do-with-Failing-Students Policy Vacuum*—and their de facto policies intra-act to produce *The Apparatus of Mistaken Failures*—a key apparatus in the production of “inappropriate” Modified IEPs.

The When-to-Initiate-Curriculum-Modifications Policy Vacuum

A key difference that matters emerged during focus groups sessions as participants realized they had differing understandings of when Modified IEPs should be enacted. While most educators agreed that modifications are appropriate for students performing below grade level, there were different interpretations of what “grade level” and “below grade level” meant. Some participants in this study interpreted “below grade level” to mean performance below Level 1 or R’s (below 50%) on the report card. Others believed it to mean performance at Level 2 or C- to C+ (60-69%). When asked where they learned that policy, these participants pointed to language in *Growing Success* (2010) as well as a chart on the back of the *Elementary Provincial Report Card* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 105) where Level 2 (C’s or 60-69%) is described as “achievement that approaches provincial standard” (p. 18). This language, and specifically the word “approaches,” is frequently interpreted as meaning below, while the term “provincial standard” is interpreted as meaning grade-level. Consequently, students receiving Level 2, C’s, or 60-69% are understood as being below grade level and therefore put on Modified IEPs. This understanding was common among teachers, SSELs, and administrators in this study.

When achievement levels were first introduced in 1998, *The Guide to the Provincial Report Card, Grades 1-8* (1998) clearly distinguished between the four achievement levels and “R” or below 50%. It states:

“R”/“Below 50” does not correspond to one of the four achievement levels. “R”/“Below 50” is used for reporting purposes to flag the need for remediation and parent involvement. “R” signals that additional learning is required before the student will begin to achieve success with this grade’s expectations. “R” indicates the need for the development of a plan to address the student’s specific learning needs and to ensure success for learning. It should not be used repeatedly on the report card. (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, p. 7)

Described in this way, the distinction between passing and failing was clear (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2

Description of Achievement Levels in the 1998 Report Card Guide

Level	Definition	Letter Grade (Grades 1 to 6)	Percentage Mark (Grades 7 and 8)
Level 4	The student has demonstrated the required knowledge and skills. Achievement exceeds the provincial standard.	A +	90–100
		A	85–89
		A–	80–84
Level 3	The student has demonstrated most of the required knowledge and skills. Achievement meets the provincial standard.	B +	77–79
		B	73–76
		B–	70–72
Level 2	The student has demonstrated some of the required knowledge and skills. Achievement approaches the provincial standard.	C +	67–69
		C	63–66
		C–	60–62
Level 1	The student has demonstrated some of the required knowledge and skills in limited ways. Achievement falls much below the provincial standard.	D +	57–59
		D	53–56
		D–	50–52
R or Below 50	The student has not demonstrated the required knowledge and skills. Extensive remediation is required.	R	Below 50

Note. Taken from the 1998 Guide to the Provincial Report Card, Grades 1-8 (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, p. 23)

When *Growing Success* (2010) replaced the 1998 policy artifact, the distinction between passing and failing became more ambiguous (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3

Description of Achievement Level in Growing Success (2010)

PERFORMANCE STANDARDS – THE ACHIEVEMENT CHART	Levels of Achievement The achievement chart also identifies four levels of achievement, defined as follows: Level 1 represents achievement that falls much below the provincial standard. The student demonstrates the specified knowledge and skills with limited effectiveness. Students must work at significantly improving learning in specific areas, as necessary, if they are to be successful in the next grade/course Level 2 represents achievement that approaches the provincial standard. The student demonstrates the specified knowledge and skills with some effectiveness. Students performing at this level need to work on identified learning gaps to ensure future success. Level 3 represents the provincial standard for achievement. The student demonstrates the specified knowledge and skills with considerable effectiveness. Parents of students achieving at level 3 can be confident that their children will be prepared for work in subsequent grades/courses. Level 4 identifies achievement that surpasses the provincial standard. The student demonstrates the specified knowledge and skills with a high degree of effectiveness. <i>However, achievement at level 4 does not mean that the student has achieved expectations beyond those specified for the grade/course.</i> Specific “qualifiers” are used with the descriptors in the achievement chart to describe student performance at each of the four levels of achievement – the qualifier <i>limited</i> is used for level 1; <i>some</i> for level 2; <i>considerable</i> for level 3; and <i>a high degree of</i> or <i>thorough</i> for level 4. Hence, achievement at level 3 in the Thinking category for the criterion “use of planning skills” would be described in the achievement chart as “[The student] uses planning skills with <i>considerable</i> effectiveness”.

Note. Taken from *Growing Success* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 40)

Although both documents suggest that an R or below 50% is the point where the student is technically *below* grade-level, the different presentations of this information across the two documents is what Barad calls a difference that makes a difference. While *Growing Success*

(2010) continued to permit the use of R's⁴⁷ on report cards, the description of a grade of R is provided on page 41, far from the descriptions of the other achievement levels which are described on page 18. This separation obscured the threshold for what is considered “below grade-level” leaving many policy actors to conclude that the line between passing and failing lies between Level 2 (C) and Level 3 (B).

Examples of diverging understandings of when to initiate Modified IEPs appear throughout the rest of this dissertation, as the issue frequently emerged in focus group conversations, and in participant stories of conflicts with colleagues or families. At times, the presence of these diverging understandings was known to the participant discussing them. At other times, they surfaced implicitly within stories—often about conflicts with colleagues, families, or administrators—and can be inferred from the context. For example, one participant described a conflict she had with her principal regrading report card grades that resulted in the initiation of several new IEPs:

In my early years at the school, there was a particular admin who did not allow us to put anything less than a C on a report card. And if it was less than a C, then that meant they needed an IEP... So, there was a year where I had nine IEPs by the end of the school year because X student wasn't achieving a C and I was not allowed to give a D. Um, so, yeah. (Selina, Grade 3 Teacher)

This tension from divergent understandings will be evident in several more stories in the chapters that follow.

The What-to-do-with-Failing-Students Policy Vacuum

As feminist sociologist Avrey Gordon writes,

The ghost, as I understand it, is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way... we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present. (2008, p. xvi)

The ghost of the polarized debate and pendulum swings between grade retention and social promotion, what I call *a policy ghost*, is very much alive and present. As explained above, when *Growing Success* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) replaced the previous *Guide to the Provincial Report Card* (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998), there was no mention of

⁴⁷ *Growing Success* also indicates that teachers can issue an “I”s to indicate “insufficient evidence is available to determine a letter grade or percentage mark” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 42).

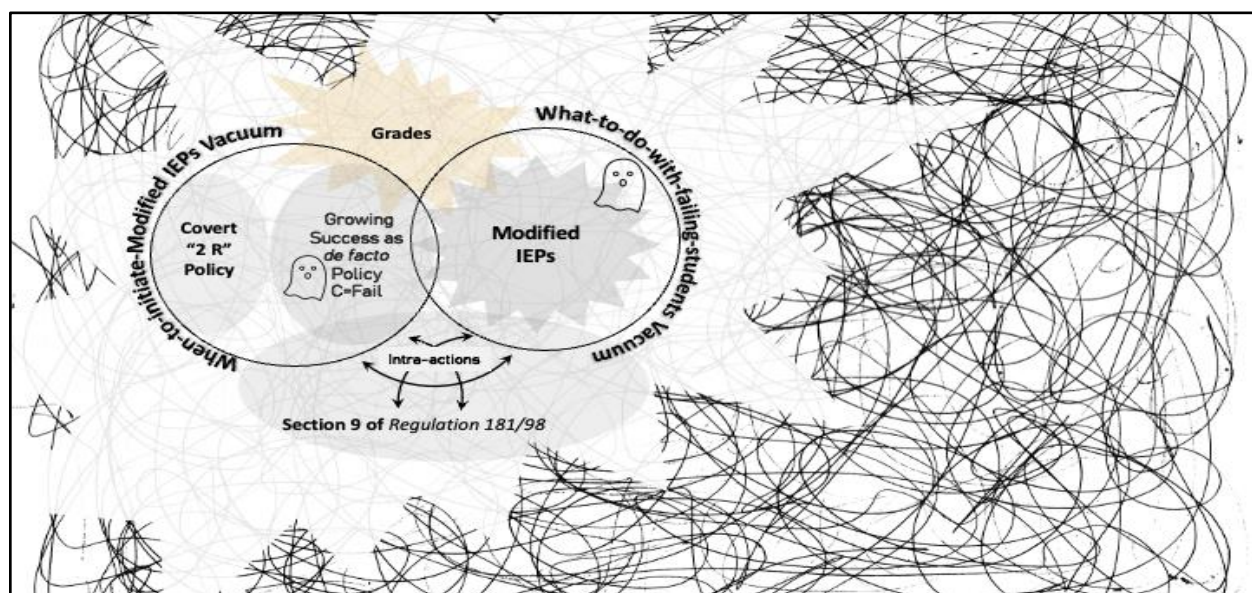
either grade retention or social promotion. This may have been in an attempt to avoid committing to either contentious policy, or there may have been other reasons. Whatever the rationale, this omission created a vacuum in the ecosystem—the *what-to-do-with-failing-students vacuum*. Although neither policy artifact indicated that a Modified IEP should be initiated for failing students (in whichever way “failing” is defined), this has become the practice in the Board—a focus of Chapter 8.

The Apparatus of Mistaken Failures

The Apparatus of Mistaken Failures is one of the clearest examples of Barad’s (2007) concept of intra-action in this dissertation. The forces in the apparatus—the ghost of the retention and social promotion policy debate, the *what-to-do-with-failing-students policy vacuum*, the *when-to-initiate-modifications policy vacuum*, the (mis)interpretation of *Growing Success* as a *de facto* policy, and Section 9 of *Regulation 181/98* which permits the use of IEPs for “unidentified” students (Chapter 3)—do not exist as discrete antecedent forces. Rather, these entangled forces materialize these mistaken failures and contribute to the production of “inappropriate” Modified IEPs. Although I recognize the impossibility of the task, I have attempted to represent this entangled apparatus in an image (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4

The Entangled Apparatus of Mistaken Failures



Note. A messy image representing the entanglement of vacuums and policies as they intra-act to produce an apparatus of mistaken failures—a key apparatus in the production of “inappropriate” Modified IEPs.

In this image, the apparatus of mistaken failures is represented as a white jagged star-like shape. Other apparatuses (Grades, and Modified IEPs) are also represented with jagged edges. Policy vacuums are represented as empty circles, and the covert and *de facto* policies that fill them are represented as grey nebulae, as is the entangled policy of regulation 181/98. The ghosts of the grade retention and social promotion debate are also included and represented by the ghost shapes. The scribbles within and around the image are in acknowledgement of the multitude of additional intra-acting forces that remain ever-present—though not made visible in my analysis. This apparatus exemplifies how policies are not simply linear instruments but rather living ecologies with gatherings, gaps, and ghosts, that possess an agency of their own, producing very real material consequences.

5.3 – Racial Disproportionality in Grade Misalignment and the Relationship to “Inappropriate” Modified IEPs

According to the MoE’s *Individual Education Plan: A Resource Guide (2004a)*, multiple forms of assessment should be considered when making IEP decisions, including report card grades, EQAO results, teacher-made assessments, commercial assessments, and clinical assessments (e.g., Psychoeducational, Speech-language). However, the data in this study suggest that report card grades, and their close relationship with passing/failing policies, are a particularly powerful force in triggering the Modified IEPs policy.

Across three different analyses—the interview/focus group analysis and two different quantitative analyses—grades consistently emerged as a key force in the apparatus of Modified IEPs. The first indicator arose when participants were asked when curriculum modifications should be initiated and nearly all of them responded with a discussion about grades. The second indication arose during the quantitative analysis presented in Chapter 4 as approximately 76-86% of students with new Modified IEPs in the junior division achieved a Level 2 (C) or above on the EQAO, which suggested that the decision to modify is often based on factors other than the student’s achievement on EQAO. Finally, in preparing the analysis of the relative risk of “inappropriate” Modified IEPs being initiated the junior division (Chapter 4), several multinomial logistic regression models comparing the relative contribution of predictor variables (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2004) showed that learning skills and report card grades held the greatest explanatory power across all three subject areas. After controlling for race, gender, and neighbourhood income, report card grades combined with learning skills consistently

outweighed attendance, suspension history, and EQAO results. This suggests that report card grades play a significant role in the production of Modified IEPs and warrant closer attention as part of the policy ecology.

The strong influence of classroom grades over the decision to modify is concerning given their high degree of subjectivity. As one principal noted,

I think assessment is really-- it's such a hard topic. And it's very different from school to school... In my entire career as a teacher and then as an admin, I've never seen anybody pull subjectivity out of it. Even when you sit down with two teachers, you've got the same piece [of student work], you know, eventually they will agree, but initially, they're so far-- half the time they're so far apart on what they would do. (Donna, Administrator)

In this section, I probe more deeply into the role and effects of report card grades in the curriculum modification ecology. Specifically, I investigate how school-based assessments align (or do not align) with EQAO performance and who is most likely to receive lower grades at school and thus be at higher risk for the initiation of an “inappropriate” Modified IEP.

Alignment Between Report Card Grades and EQAO Scores

Subjectivity and objectivity in assessment are not binary. There are spectrums of consistency, accuracy, and bias. While true objectivity in assessment remains unrealistic, EQAO⁴⁸ testing is closer to the objective end of the spectrum than classroom grades as tests are evaluated by trained teachers who do not know students' names, history, behaviour, or markers of social identities. Although the purposes and methods of classroom assessment and standardized tests can differ, EQAO results and report card grades both claim to reflect students' achievement on the overall expectations of the Ontario curriculum (EQAO, n.d.; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). EQAO results should therefore be a good point of comparison for school-based measures of student achievement. Theoretically, there *should* be considerable alignment between the two forms of evaluation. There is not.

The analyses below demonstrate the degree of alignment between Grade 3 report card grades and Grade 3 EQAO scores in the same subject area. Examining this alignment will help

⁴⁸ In Chapter 4, I acknowledged the many pitfalls and criticisms of standardized tests, including their roots in the eugenics movement; ongoing cultural bias and the promotion of a Eurocentric curriculum (Au, 2022; Dixon-Román, 2017; Jang & Sinclair, 2018). My comment here does not mean that I believe standardized tests to be objective measures of ability, but rather that they may be *slightly* more objective than classroom grades as the student is not known to the grader.

illustrate the extent to which IEP decisions, which are often based on teacher-assigned grades, are supported or contradicted by a second, more external measure of performance.

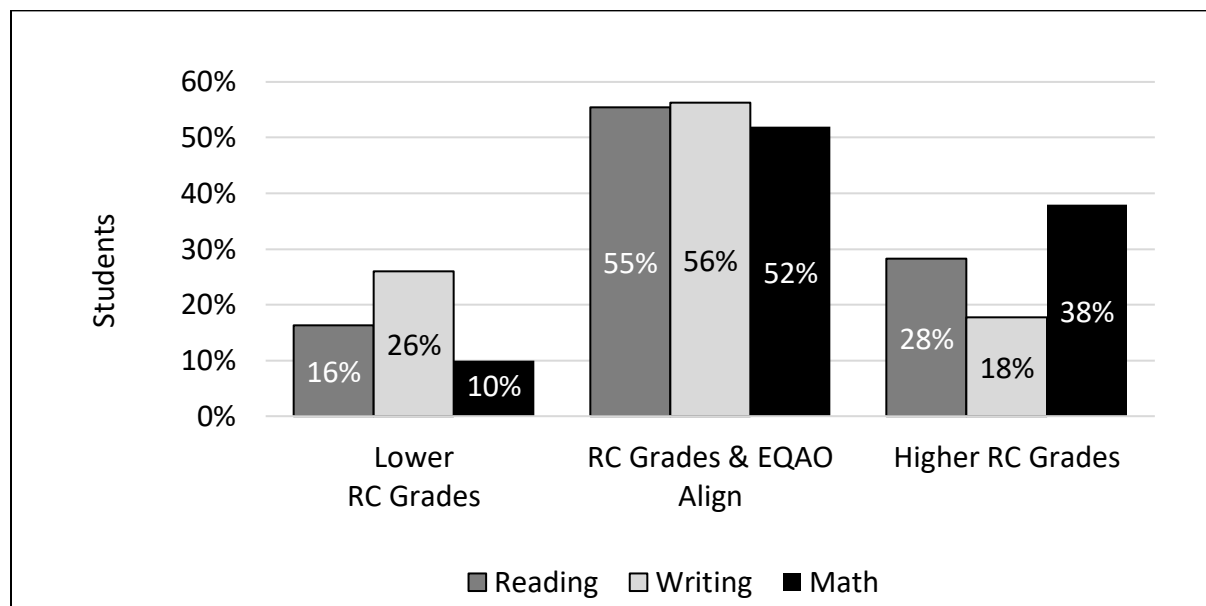
The three descriptive analyses below include students who were enrolled in the Board in Grades 3 and 6 and did not have an IEP in Grade 3. Students who performed at Level 1 or below are included in this analysis (unlike the analysis in Chapter 4 and the regression analyses below where they are excluded in order to isolate “inappropriate” Modified IEPs). French Immersion students were included in the Math analysis but excluded from the Reading and Writing analyses as they did not complete the language portion of EQAO testing in Grade 3. The analytic samples were as follows: Math ($n = 10,494$ students), Reading ($n = 9,205$), and Writing ($n = 9,212$).

To conduct these analyses, I created a new variable based on a matrix of 5 categories of EQAO scores (Below Level 1, Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, and Level 4) and 5 categories of report card grades (R, D, C, B, and A). When the EQAO score matched the equivalent report card grade (e.g., Level 2 = C), I coded the students as “aligned.” If their EQAO scores were lower than report card grades, I coded the students as “1 level higher at school” or “2 levels higher at school” depending on the degree of difference. When EQAO scores were higher than report card grades, I coded the students as either “1 level lower at school” or “2 levels lower at school.” Students who had a discrepancy of three or more levels were excluded from analysis because such large gaps were very rare and may have reflected unusual circumstances rather than systemic patterns.

In Math, only 52% of students ($n = 5,464$) had report card grades that aligned with their EQAO performance. Roughly 38% of students ($n = 3,953$) had report card grades that were higher than their EQAO performance, while 10% of students ($n = 1,077$) had grades lower than EQAO. Similarly, in Reading, 55% ($n = 5,107$) of the evaluations aligned, while 28% ($n = 2,598$) of students scored higher at school, and 16% ($n = 1,500$) scored lower at school than on EQAO. The alignment rate was highest in Writing at 56% ($n = 5,181$), but it was also highest in deflation with 38% ($n = 2,391$) of students being given lower report card grades at school (Figure 5.5).

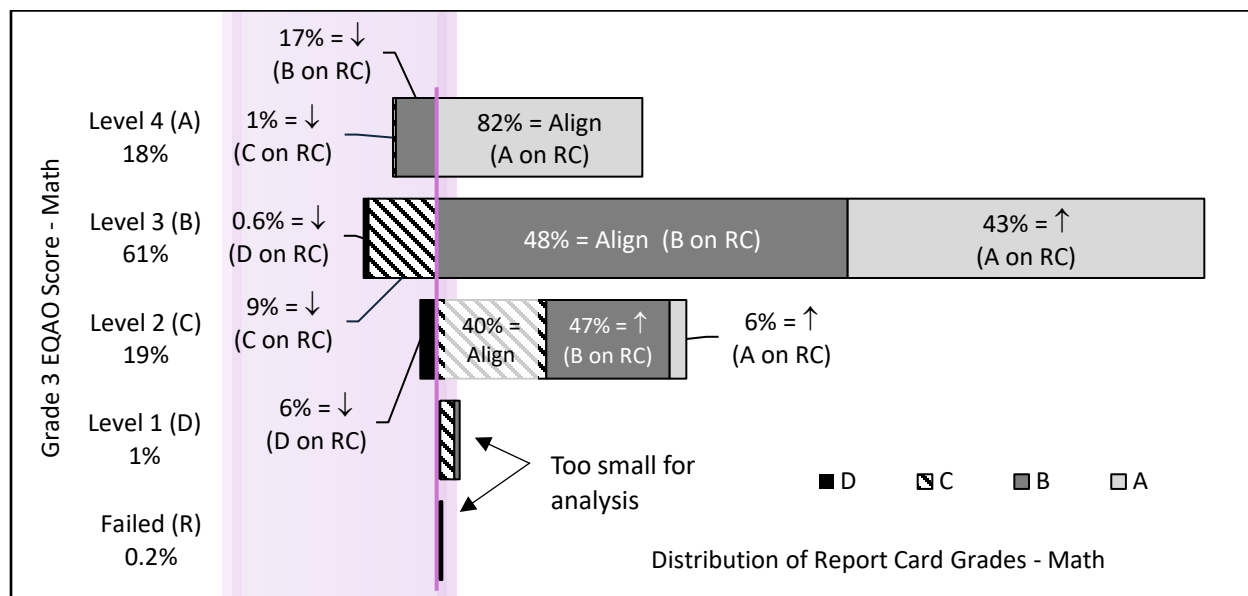
Figure 5.5

Comparison of Grade 3 EQAO Scores and Grade 3 June Report Card Grades

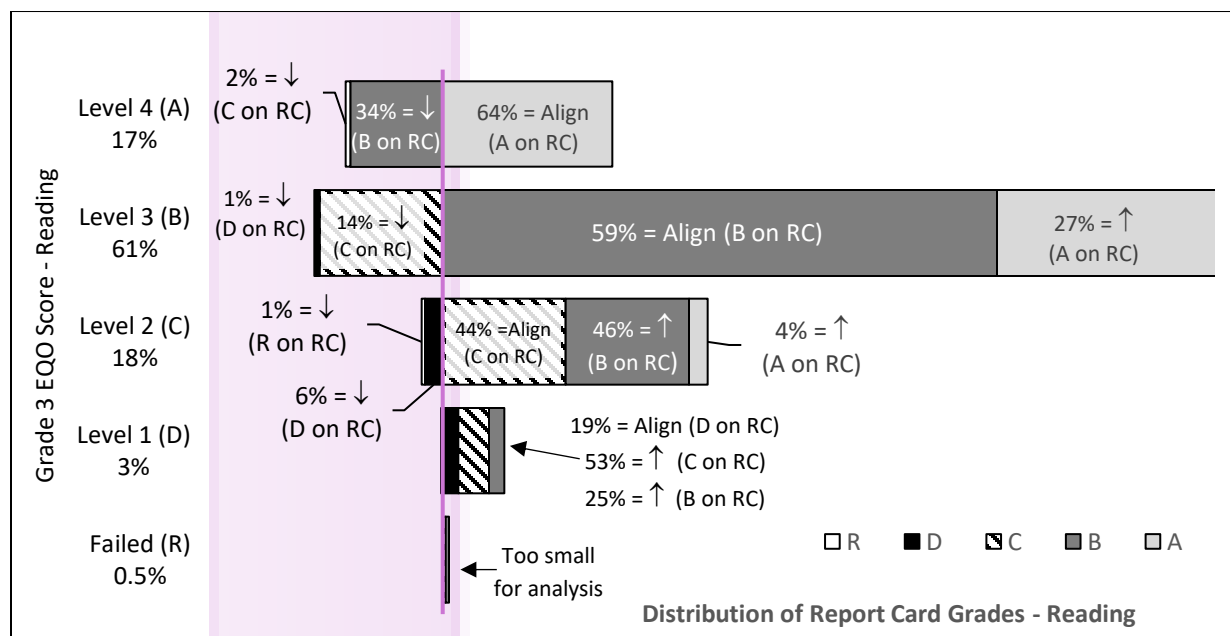


Note. Based on students who were enrolled in the Board in Grades 3 and 6 and did not have an IEP in Grade 3. Includes French Immersion students in Math, but not in Reading and Writing.

Figures 5.6, 5.7, and 5.8 offer more detailed patterns between EQAO results and report card grades; however, visually representing these patterns was challenging. The graphs below should be read as follows: The vertical axis shows the distribution of EQAO performance. For example, in Figure 5.6, 18% of students achieved a Level 4, and 61% achieved a Level 3, and so on. These percentages total 100%. The horizontal bars to the right show the distribution of that group's report card grades. For example, in Figure 5.6, of the 61% of students who achieved a Level 3 (B) on EQAO, 48% of them aligned at school (i.e., B on their report card), 43% were given As at school (i.e., higher RC grades - ↑), and 9% were given Cs and 0.6% were given Ds at school (i.e., lower report card grades - ↓). The percentages on or beside each bar total 100%. The colours in the horizontal bars are consistent with report card grades: light grey = A, dark grey = B, striped = C, black = D, and white = R. The pink zones, which are to the left of the solid pink lines, highlight the students who received report card grades that were one or two levels lower than their EQAO scores (↓). These students are of particular interest in relation to the initiation new IEPs.

Figure 5.6*Detailed Comparison of Grade 3 EQAO with Grade 3 Report Card Grades (RC) - Math*

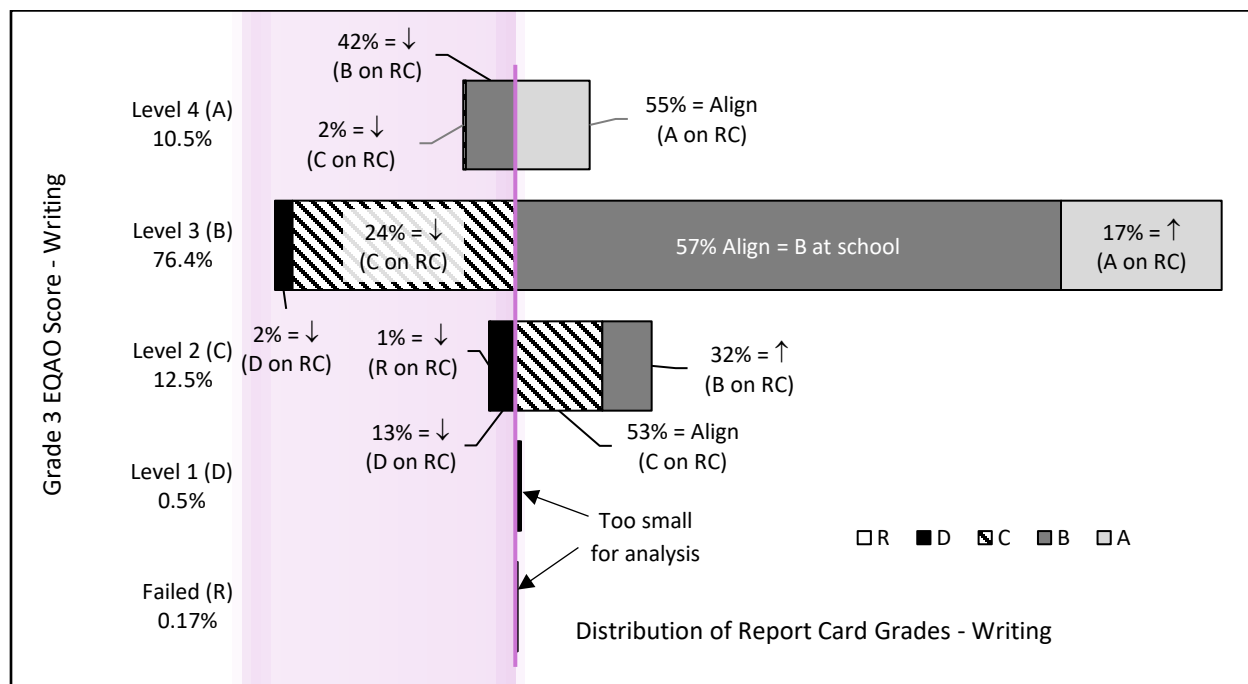
Note. Based on students who were enrolled in the Board in Grades 3 and 6 and did not have an IEP in Grade 3. Includes French Immersion students.

Figure 5.7*Detailed Comparison of Grade 3 EQAO with Grade 3 Report Card Grades (RC) - Reading*

Note. Based on students who were enrolled in the Board in Grades 3 and 6, did not have and IEP in Grade 3. Excludes French Immersion students

Figure 5.8

Detailed Comparison of Grade 3 EQAO with Grade 3 Report Card Grades (RC) - Writing



Note. Based on students who were enrolled in the Board in Grades 3 and 6 and did not have an IEP in Grade 3. Excludes French Immersion students.

Level 3 (B) was the most common achievement level on the EQAO in all three subject areas. It was also the level in which students were most likely to have a lower grade on the report card. Of the students who achieved a Level 3 (B) in Math (Figure 5.6), 9% ($n = 566$) were deemed to be performing at a Level 2 (C) at school. In Reading (Figure 5.7), of the 64% of students who scored a Level 3, 14% ($n = 871$) were assigned Level 2 (C) on their report cards, and another 1% ($n = 31$) Level 1 (D). In Writing (Figure 5.8), of the 76% who achieved a Level 3 (B), 24% ($n = 1,673$) were assigned Level 2 (C) on their report card, and almost 2% ($n = 130$) Level 1 (D) or below Level 1 (R).

Overall, the discrepancy between a Level 3 (B) and a Level 2 (C) is particularly perilous because, as illustrated in Section 5.2, Level 2 (C) is often mistaken for “below grade-level” performance. This combination of grade deflation and the misinterpretation of *Growing Success* (2010) likely accounts for many of the inappropriate initiations of curriculum modifications for Level 3 (B) students illustrated in Figures 4.8, 4.9, 4.10, and 4.11, highlighting again the intra-connection of forces in the ecosystem. The frequency of lower report card grades in Writing was significantly higher than in Reading and Math. This can, in part, be attributed to the relative

openness of the Writing curriculum at the time, combined with a lack of defined standards for Writing evaluation as discussed in Section 5.1 and again in Chapter 6. But first, two more relationships must be explored: the relationship between higher/lower report card grades and race/racism; and the relationship between higher/lower report card grades and the initiation of an “inappropriate” Modified IEP.

Racial Disproportionality in Grade Misalignment

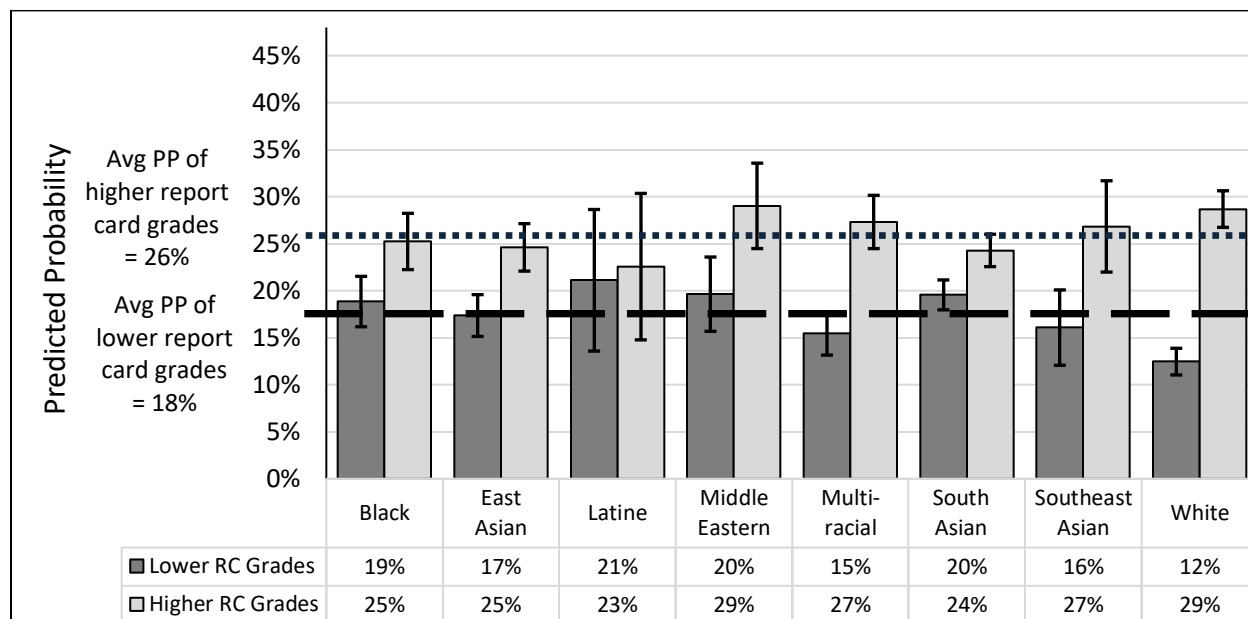
To investigate the relationships between race/racism and EQAO and report card grade alignment, I ran three multinomial logistic regressions using the same sample as the analyses of the initiation of “inappropriate” Modified IEPs presented in Chapter 4: students who were enrolled in the Board in Grades 3 and 6 and did not have an IEP in Grade 3, who performed at a level 2 (C) or above on the EQAO. French Immersion students were included in the Math analysis but excluded from the Reading and Writing analyses as they did not complete the language portion of EQAO testing in Grade 3. The analytic samples were as follows: Reading ($n = 8,879$), Writing ($n = 9,152$), and Math ($n = 10,325$ students). The results are presented below using predicted probabilities full descriptive and regression tables are available in Appendix G.

The results indicate significant patterns of racial disparities regarding which students received higher report card grades than their EQAO achievement, and which students received lower grades than their EQAO achievement (Figures 5.9, 5.10 and 5.11). The average predicted probability for having *higher grades* than EQAO scores was 26% in Reading, 17% in Writing, and 37% in Math. These averages are indicated by the dotted lines in the figures below. Middle Eastern, Multi-Racial, Southeast Asian, and white students all had a *higher-than-average* predicted probability of having report card grades higher than their EQAO scores in all three subjects. East Asian students had similar advantages in Writing and Math but not Reading. The average predicted probability of having *lower grades* than EQAO scores was 18% in Reading, 27% in Writing, and 11% in Math. These averages are indicated by the hyphenated lines in the figures below.⁴⁹ Black, Latine, Middle Eastern, and South Asian students had *higher than average* predicted probability of having *lower report card grades* than their EQAO scores in all three subjects.

⁴⁹ Please take care when interpreting the Writing analysis (Figure 5.10) as the lines indicating the average predicted probabilities are in opposite positions compared to the Reading and Math figures.

Figure 5.9

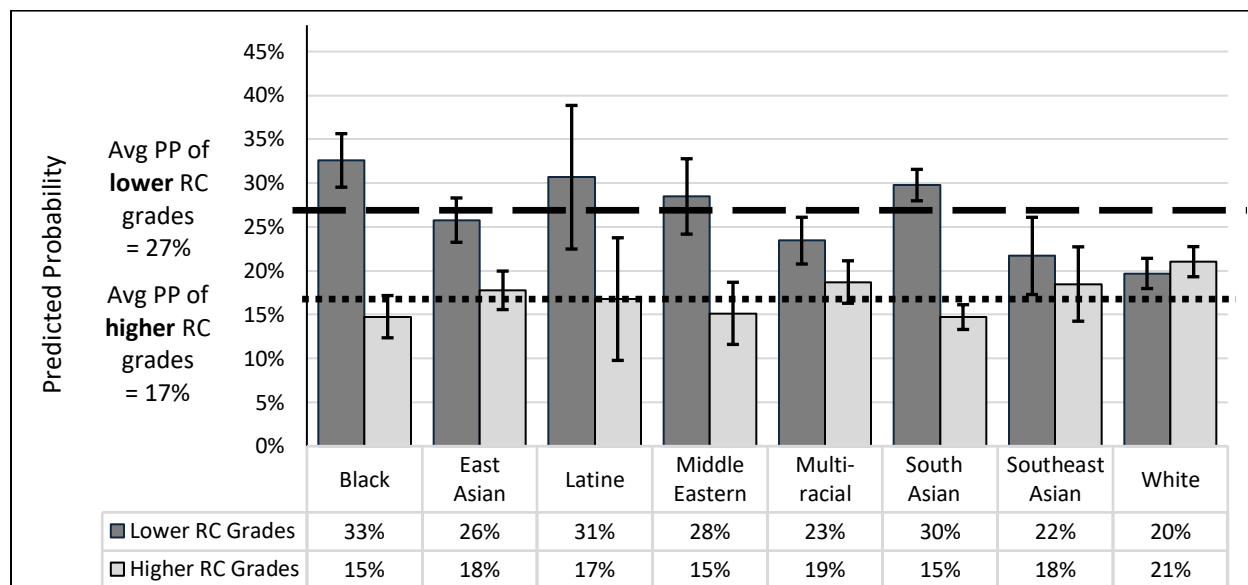
Predicted Probability (PP) of Higher or Lower Report Card Grades (RC) in Reading



Note. Based on students enrolled in the Board in Grades 3 and 6 who did not have an IEP in Grade 3. Excludes French Immersion students. Controls for gender and neighbourhood income. See Appendix G for tables. The vertical lines on each bar represent the confidence intervals.

Figure 5.10

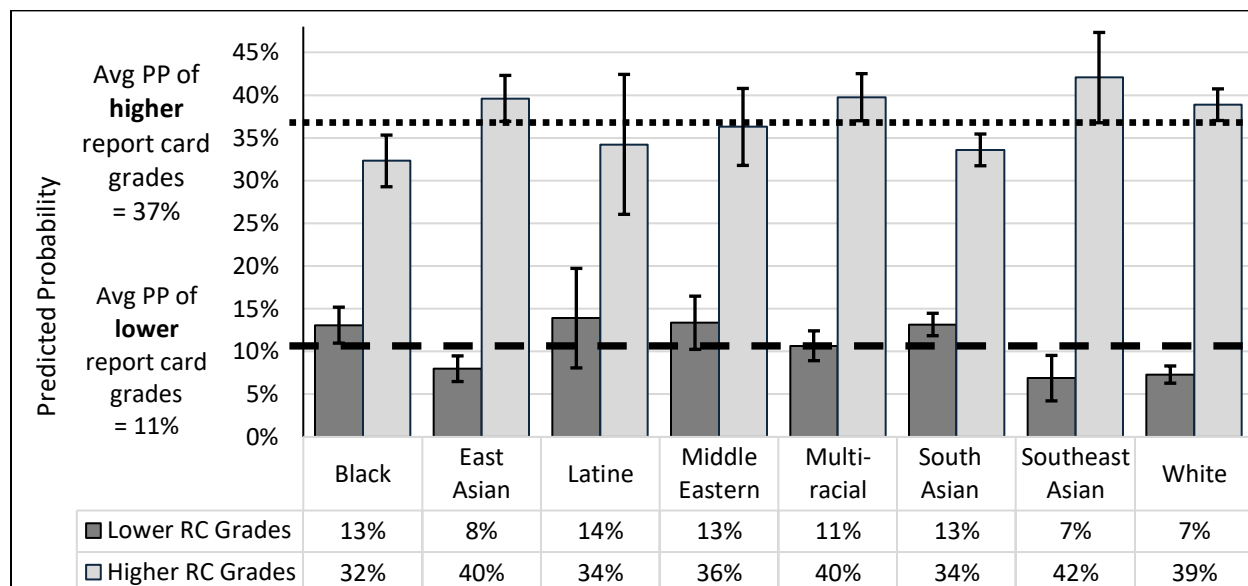
Predicted Probability (PP) of Higher or Lower Report Card Grades (RC) in Writing



Note. Based on students enrolled in the Board in Grades 3 and 6 who did not have an IEP in Grade 3. Excludes French Immersion students. Controls for gender and neighbourhood income. See Appendix G for tables. The vertical lines on each bar represent the confidence intervals.

Figure 5.11

Predicted Probability (PP) of Higher or Lower Report Card Grades (RC) in Math



Note. Based on students enrolled in the Board in Grades 3 and 6 who did not have an IEP in Grade 3. Excludes French Immersion students. Controls for gender and neighbourhood income. See Appendix G for tables. The vertical lines on each bar represent the confidence intervals.

Of particular note are some of the discrepancies between racial groups. Black students and Latine students had almost double the probability of white students of being disadvantaged in Math at school with lower report card grades (Black students = 13% and Latine students = 14% vs white students = 7% probabilities). The discrepancies are even greater in Writing where Black students had more than a 13% higher probability of being disadvantaged in school with lower report card grades compared to white students. The reverse was also true. White students had a 6% higher probability of being advantaged in school in higher report card grades than Black students. These discrepancies suggest significant racial biases in grading practices that warrant future research.

Grade Misalignment and “Inappropriate” Modified IEPs

With evidence of racial disproportionality across students who are given higher or lower grades on report cards relative to their EQAO scores, the question now becomes: What is the

relationship between higher/lower report card grades and the initiation of an “inappropriate” Modified IEP?⁵⁰

Using the same sample as the analyses above, three more multinomial logistic regressions were used to examine this relationship (see Appendix F for descriptive tables and regression results). As expected, the results indicated that students whose grades at school were lower than their EQAO scores were significantly more likely to be put on an “inappropriate” Modified IEP than those whose grades aligned (Table 5.1). Students whose Reading grades were lower than their EQAO scores were 138% more likely to be put on a Modified IEP than students whose grades aligned. Students whose Writing grades were lower than their EQAO scores were 285% more likely to be put on a Modified IEP than students whose grades aligned. Students whose Math grades were lower than their EQAO scores were 176% more likely to be put on a Modified IEP than students whose grades aligned.

Table 5.1

Relative Risk of Starting a New “Inappropriate” Modified IEP Based on Grade Deflation

	Relative Risk Ratio	Interpretation
Reading	2.38	Students whose Reading grades were lower than their EQAO scores were 138% more likely to be put on a Modified IEP than students whose grades aligned.
Writing	3.85	Students whose Writing grades were lower than their EQAO scores were 285% more likely to be put on a Modified IEP than students whose grades aligned.
Math	2.76	Students whose Math grades were lower than their EQAO scores were 176% more likely to be put on a Modified IEP than students whose grades aligned.

Note. Based on three multinomial logistic regressions presented in Appendix F.

⁵⁰ Ideally, the analyses of race/racism and grade alignment, and the analysis of grade alignment and inappropriate Modified IEPs would be combined in a single regression analysis with interaction effects. This would test for differential effects of grade alignment in the likelihood of “inappropriate” Modified IEPs across racial groups. In other words, does grade misalignment predict “inappropriate IEP” for some groups more than others? Unfortunately, the number of observations in some subgroups were too small to support a stable model. This analysis could be conducted in the future using a larger dataset that involves multiple cohorts.

Taken together, the racial disproportionality across grades/EQAO alignment, and the strong relationship between lower report card grades and the initiation of an “inappropriate” Modified IEP suggest that grading practices partially mediate the pathway to a Modified IEP.⁵¹ In other words, racial disparities in Modified IEPs are partly explained by bias in classroom grading practices.

A Vague Rendering of an Apparatus of Racial Disproportionality

Although the relationships are somewhat evasive, there is evidence that some of the forces presented in this chapter are involved in the production of the disproportional over-representation of some racialized groups on “inappropriate” Modified IEPs initiated in the junior division (Figure 4.12)—*An Apparatus of Racial Disproportionality*. Entangled forces in this apparatus include: the misalignment between curriculum and evaluation policies (i.e., open expectations and the absence of standards, particularly in Writing, that invite greater degrees of bias into grading practices), bias in grading practices (as indicated by deflated grades relative to EQAO scores, particularly for some racialized groups), and the *Apparatus of Mistaken Failures*. Together, these forces can put students who are performing at the provincial standard of a Level 3 (B) on Modified IEPs by first under-grading their performance to a Level 2 (C), and then by misinterpreting the Level 2 (C) performance as “below grade-level” (via Growing Success as *de facto* policy). While the analysis above showed clear patterns of race/racism in predicting which students were most likely to be “under-graded,” it would be interesting to see if there are also racial/sociodemographic/geographic patterns across the system relating to where *Growing Success* (2010) is most often used as the *de facto when-to-modify* policy.

Also entangled in this apparatus are forces that privilege report card grades over other technologies of evaluation (i.e., EQAO) in IEP decisions. First, as mentioned above and discussed at length in Chapter 8, curriculum modifications are functioning as a form of grade-retention within a context of social promotion. As such, a student’s pass/fail status (real or perceived) as indicated by their report card grades (not EQAO scores), strengthens the force of report card grades within the apparatus. Second, in our propensity for binary thinking and

⁵¹ Ideally, the three-way relationship between race, lowered grades, and “inappropriate” Modified IEPs would be examined using interaction effects in the regression analysis. I attempted to do this but could not fit a stable model because the sample sizes in some racial groups were too small. This analysis (and similar analyses with variables like neighbourhood income) could be conducted on a larger dataset with multiple cohorts—another important area of future research.

polarization, the intense critique of standardized tests, though deserved, may inadvertently privilege classroom grades as more authentic, accurate, or valid in making high-stakes decisions. With roots in the eugenics movement and their ongoing deployment of racial, cultural, and linguistic bias (Au, 2022; Dixon-Román, 2017; Hartman, 2003), standardized tests have rightly been the subject of substantial critique in critical education literature. Scholars working in critical race theory, disability studies in education, and decolonial education have consistently demonstrated how the structural inequities of standardized tests map onto broader questions of equity and justice (Apple, 2006; Au, 2022). Despite robust evidence demonstrating parallel disparities in grading practices (Brookhart et al., 2016; Schneider & Hutt, 2014, 2023), inaccurate student grades is not as salient a topic in the disproportionality in special education conversations. There are likely many forces shaping the uneven uptake of the critiques of these evaluation technologies. To be clear, I am not arguing in favour of standardized tests over classroom grades—both technologies operate through the same neoliberal and colonial logics of objectivity, normalization, hierarchy, and meritocracy. Rather, I argue against the antagonistic framing that positions “authentic” classroom-based assessments and teachers’ professional judgement as more equitable, when in fact, they can function as covert technologies of marginalization operating in the shadows of the critiques of standardized testing.

In tracing these entangled forces, a blurred image of an apparatus of racial disproportionality in inappropriate Modified IEPs is beginning to take shape—a apparatus that warrants greater attention in future research.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, I have started to trace the entangled forces of historic and contemporary curriculum, evaluation, retention/promotion, and IEP policies—a process that will continue in Chapters 6 and 7. I have also added policy vacuums, covert policies, *de facto* policies, and policy ghosts to the curriculum modification ecology which illuminate the ways power can circulate among the seen and unseen, as well as the present and the past. Specifically, I traced a key apparatus in the production of “inappropriate” Modified IEPs—the *Apparatus of Mistaken Failures*. In the final section, I started a deeper inquiry into the role of grades in the curriculum modification ecosystem, showing that grades that are lower than EQAO produce an especially powerful pathway towards “inappropriate” Modified IEPs, and that some historically marginalized groups are more likely to experience this kind of grade deflation through *the*

Apparatus of Racial Disproportionality. In Chapters 6 and 7, I continue this line of inquiry, probing deeper into the dynamics between curriculum, evaluation, and retention/promotion policies, with a focus on the technologies and social dynamics of grading and grading policies.

Chapter 6: Results and Discussion

Variability in Grading, Grade-Levels, and the Subsequent IEP Decisions

Apparatuses are not mere observing instruments but productive of phenomena—they are the material-discursive practices that enact agential cuts and participate in the ongoing reconfiguring of the world... Apparatuses are specific material configurations through which specific phenomena come to matter. (Barad, 2007, pp. 146–148)

Grading has been described as one of the most difficult and consequential aspects of teaching. It is “unavoidable, complex, multifaceted, and laborious” (Pasquini & DeLuca, 2021, p. 54). In Chapter 5, I demonstrated that report card grades are a significant force in the curriculum modification ecosystem. Continuing this line of inquiry, I probe deeper into the dynamics among curriculum, evaluation, passing/failing, and grading practices to explore how this entangled apparatus—the *Apparatus of Variability in Grading and Grade-level Determinations*—produces views regarding the grade-level in which a student may be performing. Through tracing this entangled apparatus, I argue that there is significant inconsistency and variability in grading decisions and grade-level determinations that ultimately lead to significant variability in opinions regarding the need for a Modified IEP. Each of the four sections that follow explores a different sub-apparatus that contributes to the Apparatus of Variability in Grading and Grade-level Determinations, ultimately revealing how this inconsistency undermines the equity and reliability of IEP decisions. The final section explores one of the effects of the Apparatus of Variability in Grading and Grade-level Determinations as shared by one participant.

6.1 – Curriculum and Evaluation Vacuums, and *de Facto* Standards that Fill Them

In Ontario’s elementary schools, the decision to modify a student’s curriculum hinges on educators’ determination as to whether the student is performing *at* or *below* grade-level. It is not uncommon to hear statements like, “they are reading at a Grade 1 level” (Andrea, SSEL), “they’re three to four years behind grade-level” (Jane, SSEL), or “we kind of pegged her at a late Grade 2” (Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher). These estimates are often assumed to be objective truths, but they are actually far from it. As I will demonstrate in this section, there is no shared understanding of what performance at any particular grade-level looks like. There is tremendous

variability across educators and schools in this determination which contributes to an uneven construction of dis/ability and the perceived “need” for a Modified IEP.

A Vacuum in Curricular Standards

The task of determining a student’s achievement level and current grade-level performance can be quite difficult. Evaluation is significantly easier when the standards are “crisp, unambiguous, and precise” (Eisner, 2002, p. 114). For example, in the Math curriculum, educators can easily determine if the student is able to demonstrate addition and subtraction of numbers up to 10 (Grade 1) or demonstrate addition and subtraction of numbers up to 20 (Grade 2) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). These *technical skills*⁵² are excellent candidates for a criterion-referenced system and the subsequent determination of a student’s grade-level. However, not all skills can be scaffolded in such a specific, sequential way; many highly valued skills develop in idiosyncratic, multi-directional ways, including problem solving and creative writing. These more *wholistic skills*⁵³ are reflected in curriculum expectations that repeat from grade to grade without a prescribed sequence. For example, expectation C3 of the Reading curriculum states:

C3. apply critical thinking skills to deepen understanding of texts, and analyze how various perspectives and topics are communicated and addressed in a variety of texts, including digital, media, and cultural texts (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023, p. 105)

These abilities are significantly more difficult to ascribe to a particular achievement level, or grade-level. When participants were asked *How do you/teachers know what “grade-level” means?* many responded with frustration. One administrator sighed and said, “I don’t [pause]-- I don’t think they have any real idea” (Victor, Administrator). Another participant admitted,

I have no idea to be quite honest. I don’t really know. I don’t really know how to tell the difference between the critical thinking part of the Writing [curriculum]. Like, I don’t know how to tell the difference between Grade 4, 5, and 6. (Alana, SSEL)

⁵² In *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs* (2022), curriculum expert, Elliot Eisner refers to these skills as “*behavioural objectives*.” This term would likely conjure a different meaning in today’s context; therefore, I use “*technical skills*” in this report.

⁵³ Eisner (2022) described these skills as “*problem-solving objectives*” and “*expressive outcomes*.” These too may carry different meanings in today’s context; therefore “*wholistic skills*” is used as an alternative in this report.

Curriculum expert Elliot Eisner (2002) described the difference in evaluating technical and wholistic skills:

Standards are crisp, unambiguous, and precise. A person can swim five lengths of the pool or cannot. Someone can spell aardvark or cannot... For such performances, standards are specifiable and applicable by anyone or by any machine that “knows” the rules through which the standards are to be applied. But what about the rhetorical force of a student’s essay?... What about her intellectual style, the ways she interprets the evidence in a science experiment, the way in which historical material is analysed? Are these subject to standards? (p. 114)

For over a century, there has been a highly polarized debate revolving around whether curricula should be very technical *or* wholistic (Dewey, 1938; Kliebard, 2004; Tyler, 1949). In reality, most of the current curricula in Ontario balance both technical *and* wholistic objectives. Yet, we do not yet have an evaluation system that works effectively with both systems. As one participant described,

That grade level is super hard to ascertain and ascribe to that piece of work. And there really isn't much out there [e.g. benchmarks, exemplars] in the sense that, you know, you can use... It's significantly easier when you have, you know, specific [expectations]. Like Math is much easier to sort of—'Yep, they can either do this or they can't'... But Writing-- unless you've got extremely detailed success criteria [participant shrugs]. Even when you use the OWA [Ontario Writing Assessment]. Are you using your Exemplars? [laughs]⁵⁴ They're still subjective no matter what way you look at it. (Donna, Administrator)

When Ontario first introduced criterion-referenced evaluation in the late 1990s, there was recognition that assessment of the wholistic skills would require more guidance and specificity than what the curriculum expectations alone could provide. The MoE therefore produced companion guides with the provincial curriculum called Exemplars. These books contained two examples of student work for each achievement level in every grade-level. While the curriculum provided wholistic expectations such as “communicate ideas and information for specific purposes and to specific audiences” (overall expectation in Grade 3 Writing, 1997, p. 15), the Exemplars provided examples of what each achievement level looked like.

The most recent Writing Exemplars were produced in 1999 but are still referenced as one of the only guides for evaluating elementary Writing. One participant noted, “Well, we have provincial exemplars that are eons old... which we do pull out because there's nothing else. We

⁵⁴ Note the laughter associated with the idea of using exemplars. See below.

don't have anything. We really don't have anything. Any sort of assessment for Writing” (Alana, SSEL). Another participant laughed when I asked what examples teachers used to define grade-level standards: [Laughing] “You're going back, way back when we used to get work samples for-for curriculum documents! We haven't gotten those in decades!” (Kimberly, Administrator).

As explained in Chapter 2, the meaning of “policy,” goes far beyond “written statements of intent, guidelines, restrictions or dictates that have been crafted to meet assorted needs for clarity, restriction, and direction (Lea, 2024, p. 3). As Ball and colleagues (2012) explain, policy also includes *micro-technologies* that control the meaning of policy, and effectively then become policies themselves:

visual materials and resources that document/illustrate what has to be done, or what is desirable conduct. These are artefacts that ‘mark’ policy directionality; that circulate and reinforce and represent what is to be done. Sometimes these artefacts come to stand for/represent the subjects of policy – such as the use of ...[rubrics]. (p. 121-122)

Curriculum Exemplars are a perfect example of one such micro-technology. When Ontario’s curriculum and evaluation policies were introduced in the late 1990s, the accompanying exemplars were an essential tool for their translation.

Some educators have protectively guarded their personal copies for the past 25 years, but with ongoing updates to curriculum expectations, the original exemplar documents have lost their relevance (e.g., the Grade 6 Writing examples are handwritten essays about “Canada’s Newest Territory”—Nunavut). In their scarcity and irrelevance, the old curriculum exemplars have become a joke, provoking laughter when brought up in the interviews and focus groups. The absence of curriculum exemplars, and more generally, explicit achievement standards, the misalignment between curriculum and evaluation policies has produced a substantial vacuum in the curriculum modification ecosystem. In response, participants report using alternative ways to determine achievement levels and grade-level performance—*de facto* achievement standards—that increase inconsistency and variability in grading and IEP decisions.

DIY Exemplars as *de Facto* Achievement Standards

One participant described how helpful it was when her principal made binders of exemplars based on work produced in their school: “And this is a great binder because even when I was on [maternity] leave, I'm like, ‘Oh, my gosh!’ because sometimes you forget ‘where should they be at?’” (Sophia, Grade 2/3 Teacher). While this participant found the school-based

exemplars to be extremely helpful, other comments in the interview suggested that this particular school was very high-achieving. Using school-based standards in this context may have therefore set the bar unfairly high for some students, including the ELL student who was being considered for a Modified IEP in her class.

Another participant, a beginning teacher, described using exemplars she found online in Facebook groups and a Google Drive shared by Ontario teachers:

So, Facebook. There's these Facebook groups...There's like a Grade 5 teacher Facebook group, or there's a Grade 5 virtual teacher Facebook group. So, I find those were helpful, and that if you need any support, you can go online and ask each other. (Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher)

While this kind of sharing amongst teachers is both valuable and perhaps even essential, some degree of quality control may be desirable, given that such important decisions are being made based on these resources.

Commercial Products as *de Facto* Achievement Standards

Policy and Program Memorandum 155 (PPM155) outlines how diagnostic assessment tools should be used to inform teaching practices in Ontario. It stipulates that school boards must establish a list of approved diagnostic assessment tools that align with board improvement plans (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022). However, this policy does not apply to assessments for special education, including:

educational and/or other professional assessments conducted to identify students with special education needs, to determine the special education programs and/or services required by these students, and/or to support decisions related to such programs and services. (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Problems with *PPM 155* are discussed in detail in the *Right to Read* report (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022), but for the purposes of this research, it is sufficient to note that there are no guidelines or limitations regarding the tools that can be used to determine if a student is below grade-level and therefore requires a Modified IEP.

Participants in this study reported using a wide variety of Language assessments to determine a student's current grade-level. Some of these evaluation technologies were on the

Board's 2023 approved assessment list⁵⁵ for mainstream classroom use (indicated with *) and many were not:

- Ontario Writing Assessment (OWA)
- Levelled Literacy Intervention (Fountas and Pinnell)
- Don Word Test
- Flynt Cooter Comprehensive Reading Inventory
- The Silvaroli Reading Program (Classroom Reading Inventory)
- Benchmark Assessment System (Fountas and Pinnell) *
- Morrison & McCall Spelling Scale
- CASI Reading Assessment *
- Reading A-Z
- Reading Recovery
- Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT)
- Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) *

Even though most of these products did not align with Ontario's 2006 Language curriculum (including those that were on the Board's approved assessment list at the time of this study), some teachers in this study reported that their report card grades were exclusively based on their students' achievement on these commercial products, particularly the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA).

The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) as de facto Reading Standards

The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) is a classroom-based reading assessment for students in Kindergarten to Grade 8, based on the three-cue reading system (Beaver & Carter, 2006). It evaluates students in four areas including reading engagement, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. These measures are combined to determine students' "independent" and "instructional" reading levels (Beaver & Carter, 2006).

⁵⁵ The assessments with * were on the Board's approved assessment list at the time of participant interviews and focus groups in 2023, and despite significant controversy, the CASI and DRA remained on the approved list for the following year (2024-25) (Toronto District School Board, 2024b). None of the assessments noted here is still on the approved list in 2025-26 (Toronto District School Board, 2025b).

The DRA has been widely used in the Board for many years and all ten teacher participants in this study reported using it to determine students' grades in Reading.⁵⁶ One participant explained,

Maybe there are other [assessments]... more curriculum related, but they're not easily accessible to me. What's easily accessible, what's drilled to me is the DRA. When I go to SST, they want the DRA score. When my principal asks me every three months, they want a DRA score. Um, and the union will say, you can use whatever assessment at your discretion, but what's provided to me is the DRA. So that is generally what I'm using for reading assessment. (Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher)

The DRA has been previously critiqued for having ill-defined standards, subjective scoring, and low reliability coefficients (A. M. McCarthy & Christ, 2010; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022), but in this study, I observed a more hidden way the use of the DRA contributes to variability in grading: as a *de facto* policy guiding what constitutes grade-level performance.

DRA Scores and Grade-Level Charts. The DRA provides a chart that maps DRA scores onto grade-levels. It suggests, for example, that a student in Grade 1 should be able to independently read a level 3 in the fall, level 10 mid-year, and level 16 by June. Grade 3s should start at level 28 in September and end at level 38 in June (Beaver & Carter, 2006, p. 308).

Participants interpreted these guidelines in different ways. For example, some followed the instructions closely and considered the recommended benchmarks based on the time of year: "I'm looking for them to be, I don't know, probably Z.⁵⁷ Level Z by the end of the year" (Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher). Others treated any score within the grade-range (e.g., Grade 3= 28-38) to be "at grade-level" regardless of the time of year: "28 and up I believe is Grade 3 level" (Lina, Grade 3/4 Teacher).

When teachers convert these scores to report card grades, they combine their interpretation of the DRA chart with their interpretation of Ontario's achievement levels. For example, some Grade 3 teachers might consider the full range of Grade 3 DRA scores (28-40) and assign those an high end of the range (high 30s or above) as A's, those in the middle of the

⁵⁶ The new Ontario language curriculum was released shortly after this study was completed in 2023. With the return to phonics-based reading instruction outlined in the new curriculum, many school boards across Ontario have shifted towards more compatible assessments. The DRA was removed from the Board's approved list of assessments in 2025.

⁵⁷ Note the use of a letter instead of a number. This likely means the teacher is using a set of readers from the Fountas and Pinnell series and converting or conflating it was a DRA score.

range (mid 30s) as B's, and those in the lower range (28 to low 30s) as C's—some of whom may then be referred for a Modified IEP (Chapter 5). In a second approach, some teachers might interpret all students from levels 28-38 as being in the Grade 3 range and might assign all of them B's (for “meeting grade-level expectations” as per language in *Growing Success*). In this interpretation, A's are reserved for students reading at Level 40+ (“exceeding grade-level expectations”), and C's for students reading below Level 28—this approach provides a much wider band of “normalcy.” In a third approach, one that factors in the time of year as prescribed by the DRA, on a June report card, a Grade 3 teacher may only consider scores of 38 and 40 as appropriate for Grade 3 students for that time of year and deserving of B's, reserving A's for those above 40 and C's for anyone at or below level 36—an extremely narrow band of “normal.”

Across these examples, what becomes evident is that individual grading technologies like the DRA are not discrete entities in the ecology. They are part of an entangled apparatus intra-acting with policies (in this case, the achievement levels outlined in *Growing Success*), as well as ideologies (in this case, the three-cue reading system and norm-referenced guidelines), and many other material-discursive forces to produce the realities they claim to measure—levels, grades, and categorizations that materialize as evidence of ability and need for modification. In other words, these technologies do not *reflect* reality; they *produce* it.

The Messiness of Schools and the use of Conversion Charts. The formal DRA assessment should only be done a few times a year so that students do not become familiar with the reading passages (Beaver & Carter, 2006). In the interim, educators often conduct more informal running records⁵⁸ on any set of leveled readers or any text “familiar to the child” (Unger et al., 2025, p. 9)—another evaluation method on the Board's approved list of assessment tools at the time of this study (Toronto District School Board, 2024b, p. 45).⁵⁹ While the “DRA level” should specifically refer to the result on the formal DRA assessment using the DRA reading materials, educators often refer to the student's running record results on any set of leveled readers as their “DRA level.”

⁵⁸ A *running record* is a technique for assessing the accuracy of a student's reading. The DRA requires teachers to conduct running records on the DRA's own leveled reading passages as part of the formal DRA diagnostic. When running records are conducted on other texts, it is a more formative form of assessment as the reading level of the text is not necessarily controlled and the emphasis is supposed to be on analysing the reader's mistakes (Unger et al., 2025).

⁵⁹ Note, running records were removed from the Board's Approved List of Diagnostic Assessment Tools in the 2025-26 school year (Toronto District School Board, 2025b).

It is important to note that schools are inherently messy and sometimes even chaotic places. Many teachers, including several participants in this study, use a hodgepodge of leveled reading products from multiple publishers that have been collected over many years. There are therefore dozens of conversion charts available online from blogs, public libraries, book publishers, and Teachers-pay-Teachers to translate one leveled reading product to another in order to determine a students' achievement level or grade-level (see Heinemann, 2025). For example, one of the teacher participants submitted a chart circulating in their school.

The following excerpt from an interview with a highly experienced teacher who had returned to the primary division after many years in a different role, demonstrates this messiness:

Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher: He's reading at a level D. Um, like when I assessed him. Like...when I did a DRA with him for his report card for term one, it was like a D. Like a "instructional" D. But now I feel like he's more like "independent" D. So, you know, he's improving but we're still at a D...

Interviewer: D? Um, sorry. DRAs, I think, go by number. [It's a] number system. Would that be a level 4 then?

Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher: Yeah, I guess so. Yes. My, sorry-- my DRA kit says letters and also numbers. I'm thinking of my level books that are on my wall and--

Interviewer: It might be Fountas and Pinnell...

Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher: Oh, is it not a DRA? I don't know. My DRA kit does say D though. So, I don't know. But I think it's a [level 4].

Interviewer: Okay... Um, how do you know what grade level that equates?

Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher: Uh, I don't know. What the score sheet is. Whatever that tells me. The reading levels. I don't know what that is called. So, I don't know. There's some sort of scoring sheet that's telling me what range they should be in.

Interviewer: Does that come in the DRA kit?

Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher: [sarcastically] If you had a full kit, it probably would! ... If you didn't have pieces of a kit and photocopied materials, it might!

Conversion charts are prolific online, each with slight variations. Some charts account for the differences at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year, while others do not. Some recognize the "summer slide"⁶⁰ or that there may be some overlap between grades and reading

⁶⁰ The idea that students may regress in their level over the summer without consistent practice in reading.

levels (e.g., Level 18 = Grades 1 or 2 or 3). These slight variations have significant impacts when a student might be considered a “B” by one product but not another, or “at grade-level” on one chart but not another.

Even more problematic, one teacher participant went by memory, albeit incorrect, for the conversion of DRA levels to the associated grade-level. When discussing why her Grade 3 student needed a Modified IEP, she explained:

Lina, Grade 3/4 Teacher: He is at a Grade 1 level. His reading. He's at a level 16, which is like beginning Grade 1.⁶¹ [It] could be higher. I haven't tested him, like, for a while. So, he now might be level 18 in DRA.

Interviewer: Uh, [pause] okay.

Lina, Grade 3/4 Teacher: Yeah. Which is beginning Grade 1. So, he still has some challenges reading like decoding of the text, but he's able to give like insightful comments about what's going on in the story. He's able to make connections. He always draws upon previous experiences, so he's able to tell about what's read as opposed to reading the story itself.

I did not find any conversion chart that puts a DRA level 16 at an *early* Grade 1 level as this teacher believed. It is consistently considered *late* Grade 1, and some charts even place it at an early Grade 3 level. Though it is impossible to say, perhaps if a different chart was used for the student above, he would not have been perceived to be so far below grade-level and would therefore not have been considered a candidate for a Modified IEP in Reading. This case illustrates that teacher skill, and a degree of luck in terms of which conversion chart (i.e., *de facto* standards) are used, are also entangled within the grading apparatus. In some cases, an inaccurate or unfair *de facto* standard can produce an inappropriate pathologization of a student's reading ability that could lead towards an “inappropriate” Modified IEP.

Commercial Spelling Tests as de facto Writing Standards

The use of commercial spelling tests to determine a student's grade-level in Writing, was common among participants. These assessments were sometimes done by the teachers themselves or the SSELs at their school. The problem with determining students' grade-level performance (and the subsequent IEP decisions in Writing) based on many of the commercial

⁶¹ No, a level 3-4 is considered early Grade 1. The DRA considers Level 16 as late Grade 1 or early Grade 2 (Beaver & Carter, 2006).

spelling assessments is that these tools do not necessarily align with the Ontario curriculum or what the student was taught.

As explained in Chapter 5, the 2006 Language curriculum did not provide spelling benchmarks or explicit standards. The same “specific” spelling expectations were used over and over from grades 1-8 with minimal variation. For example, expectation 3.1: “spell high frequency words correctly (e.g., words from their oral vocabulary, the class word wall, and shared-, guided-, and independent-reading texts)” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). In the whole-word approach to language instruction, spelling is taught organically. For example, by correcting spelling on students’ work, through weekly dictations based on themed vocabulary from classroom materials, or it simply may not have been taught at all depending on the teacher’s curricular emphasis (Section 6.4). Yet, participants reported that several spelling assessments were used to determine if a Modified IEP in Writing was needed.

Morrison-McCall Spelling Scale. Several participants reported that the Morrison-McCall Spelling Scale (Morrison & McCall, 1923) was used to determine their student’s grade-level in Writing. This nearly obsolete assessment is a norm-referenced test published in 1923 that assumes that spelling ability correlates with a “mental age” (Figure 6.1). For example, this assessment states that a student of “132 months” (age 11) should spell 26/50 words correctly on any of the eight lists included in the manual. Students above the prescribed thresholds are considered “brighter than normal,” and students with scores below that are considered “duller than normal” (p. 5). According to this assessment, if an older student (e.g., 168 months or 14 years old) spelled only 26 words correctly, they were deemed to have a “mental age” of 11-years-old.

Figure 6.1*“Spelling Age” of Students According to the Morrison-MacCall Spelling Scale*

TABLE 3											
T score	25	30	35	40	45	50	55	60	65	70	75
Percentage of 12-year-olds exceeding	1	2	7	16	31	50	69	84	93	98	99

Spelling age.¹ A score of 26 words correct is the normal score for the age of just 11 years (132 months). Any pupil, therefore, making a score of 26 is said to have a spelling age of 132 months. In the third column of Table 2 is given the spelling age corresponding to each score.

¹A spelling age corresponds to a mental age obtained by a test of mental ability. A pupil should have a spelling age equal to his mental age, provided his spelling ability is on a par with his mental ability.

Note. Taken from page 4 of the *Morrison-McCall Spelling Scale* found on (Doc. 2: Morrison-McCall Spelling Scale, n.d.).

The Morrison-McCall Spelling Scale manual provides eight “equally difficult” lists with 50 words each, all carefully selected by “measurement experts.” Over one hundred years since these words were chosen, many have lost their relevance for students today. For example:

42. Cordially. He welcomed us cordially. Cordially.

36. Colonies. The colonies will govern themselves. Colonies.

49. Kerosene. Kerosene is an oil that burns. Kerosene.

It is fundamentally unfair to evaluate students on content that has never been taught. Without curricular alignment,⁶² these tests simply presume that if the student develops normally, they will suddenly know how to spell “contentious” once they are 12 years old. When this type of assessment is used in the context of making IEP decisions, the decision to initiate a Modified IEP is justified for anyone who did not magically meet these untaught milestones.

⁶² Please note that research suggests that even when theme-based spelling lists are taught in class, they do very little to improve students’ ability to spell new words (Dymock & Nicholson, 2017). There is far more evidence to support the use of phonics-based spelling programs, such as Wilson Foundations or Reading Mastery (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022). However, what I argue here is that what is most important in any form of teaching, is that the assessment aligns with the content students have been taught.

Many of the students discussed in this study never stood a chance. When discussing what assessments were used to determine a need for a Modified IEP in Writing for a Grade 6 student with Dyslexia, the classroom teacher explained:

Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher: If I look off of the IEP, I see Morrison and McCall Spelling Diagnostic, Silvaroli Reading Inventory. Those are the two that showed up on there.

Interviewer: Okay. And the SSEL did those? And basically, said she's coming out at a Grade 2 level?...

Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher: Yes. Decodes Grade 2 vocabulary with 80% accuracy, and the spelling was Grade 2.9 achievement.

The *Morrison-McCall Spelling Scale* was also used in another school for a Grade 6 student:

Barbara, Grade 5/6 Teacher: And then Morrison & McCall for spelling...

Interviewer: Okay. And how does he perform on those ones?

Barbara, Grade 5/6 Teacher: Um, the spelling one, he topped out at about age, I think it was eight. So, uh, you know, below grade-level or below age level. It's an age band.

As explained above, Ontario's *PPM 155* requires that school boards create a list of approved assessments for mainstream use, but special education decisions are exempt from the approved list of assessments. One participant worried that this policy vacuum, in conjunction with improperly conducted assessments, could lead to flawed IEP decisions:

Part of the challenge that we're facing is teachers don't know which diagnostics are board-approved and which ones are not. And then what is the proper training to perform certain diagnostics? Uh, for example, the Weschler Fundamentals, you know, is used by many... But there [needs to be] a lot of learning and education around how to implement that tool properly. And so, the fear is, [are] we using the right data? Or correct and accurate data? And so, the diagnostic piece is a real challenge. (Victor, Administrator)

In the ongoing use of antiquated assessment technologies, I see a haunting—the presence of a social violence that has not been resolved (Gordon, 2008). Here, the ideologies of normalcy, developmentalism, and the measurement of innate ability—beliefs historically entangled with the eugenics movement—remain active and powerful in educational logics. The continued use of the *Morrison-McCall Spelling Scale* as a *de facto* standard of achievement even in contexts where the curriculum did not explicitly prescribe the teaching of spelling skills, does not measure student under-performance; it produces student under-performance through the entanglement of curriculum, pedagogy, and the haunting of ablest ideologies. Also entwined in this apparatus is a

paradigm of presumed objectivity, which lends a scientific authoritative justification for restricting a student's access to curriculum.

A Note on Professional Judgement

Although policy and professional judgement are often pitted against each other, fair and effective educational practice requires both. While I am building a case for a more explicit policy articulating performance standards, this should not be seen as a critique of teacher professional judgement. Rather, I argue that more carefully articulated policy artifacts would support it.

Growing Success (2010) defines professional judgement as:

judgement that is informed by professional knowledge of curriculum expectations, context, evidence of learning, methods of instruction and assessment, *and the criteria and standards*, that indicate success in student learning. (p. 152, *emphasis added*)

Teachers need freedom to use their professional judgement in order to adapt to the individual needs of students, respond to classroom situations, and navigate conflicting policies. However, this professional judgement may be hindered if the policies on which it is to be based (i.e., “the criteria and standards”) are not articulated.

Thoughtfully designed policy directives can provide a guiding framework that can be comforting to educators. Requiring teachers to exercise their professional judgement without any policy-texts to guide them can be stressful, particularly when making a high-stakes decision for a very young child. For example, one teacher participant in this study was really struggling with the difficult decision to pass or fail a Grade 2 student in Math:

I don't know, like, if I'm gonna-- [fail him]. Like, it'll obviously have to be a conversation with my admin. And I *would* say SSEL, except we don't really have a SSEL... Even experienced teachers that have been in the classroom the whole time are like, ‘I have no idea what I'm doing.’ And I'm like, ‘I really have no idea what I'm doing.’ And there's not been-- like, I'm kind of like figuring it out and seeing people post things on Facebook groups. And I'm like, ‘Ooh, this looks helpful.’ (Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher)

Guidance regarding what constitutes passing, failing, and grade-level performance is especially important for IEP decisions. Estimates of students' current grade-level performance are foundational to three key decisions: when to initiate modifications, what level to modify to, and when the modified programming should be removed. As one participant summarized, “I think most of the teachers that I work with would welcome clear exemplars, benchmarks, moderated marking. That sort of thing” (Grace, SSEL). Adding policy micro-technologies such as

exemplars to the ecosystem would not replace the need for professional judgement; they would exist symbiotically.

The requirement that educators use their professional judgement to perform standards-based assessments without the support of clearly defined standards produces inconsistency and variability in educators' determinations of who requires a Modified IEP. In this policy vacuum *de facto* standards emerge that invite narrow views of normativity, pathologize learning and perpetuate inequities in how students are assessed, categorized, and granted access to curriculum.

6.2 – The Murky Relationship Between Grading and Grade-level

There is a murky relationship between achievement levels (e.g. Levels 1- 4 or A-Rs) and grade-levels (e.g. Grade 3 vs Grade 4). Although every curriculum document outlines the achievement levels within a grade, they do not provide guidelines for determining if a student has failed a grade. Though it is rarely thought of in this way, curriculum modifications implicitly require that educators map achievement levels onto grade-levels—a nearly impossible task. For example, if a student is determined to be performing *below* grade-level on a vague expectation that repeats year after year, educators need to determine in which grade-level the student *is* performing. There are many different ways to attempt this task.

In Writing, a common method is to compare the students' work to examples of Level 3 (indicative of a B grade) in a variety of grade-levels. When a close match is found (on whichever criteria the teacher chose to use), the student is believed to be performing at that grade-level. But as the following focus group excerpt demonstrates, this approach conflicts with the understanding that C's and D's are also at grade-level, which causes some confusion:

Moderator: How do you know what grade-level a student is performing at?

Tracey, Administrator: I look at Level 3 [B's or 70-79%]. The grade-level for me is the Level 3,⁶³ right? So, if I look at a Grade 3 Writing and that's a Level 3, that's what I'm comparing to know if that's their grade level. That's what I would do. I don't know if that's what should be done but that's how I decide what grade-level they are.

[later in the session]

Donna, Administrator: [Tracey], you said you use Level 3, right? That's the standard. That's what we're told to use. That's what the Ministry expects. But a 51% is a pass too, like, in my belief system, it can be passed. Like, they passed at a Level 1. If it's an R,

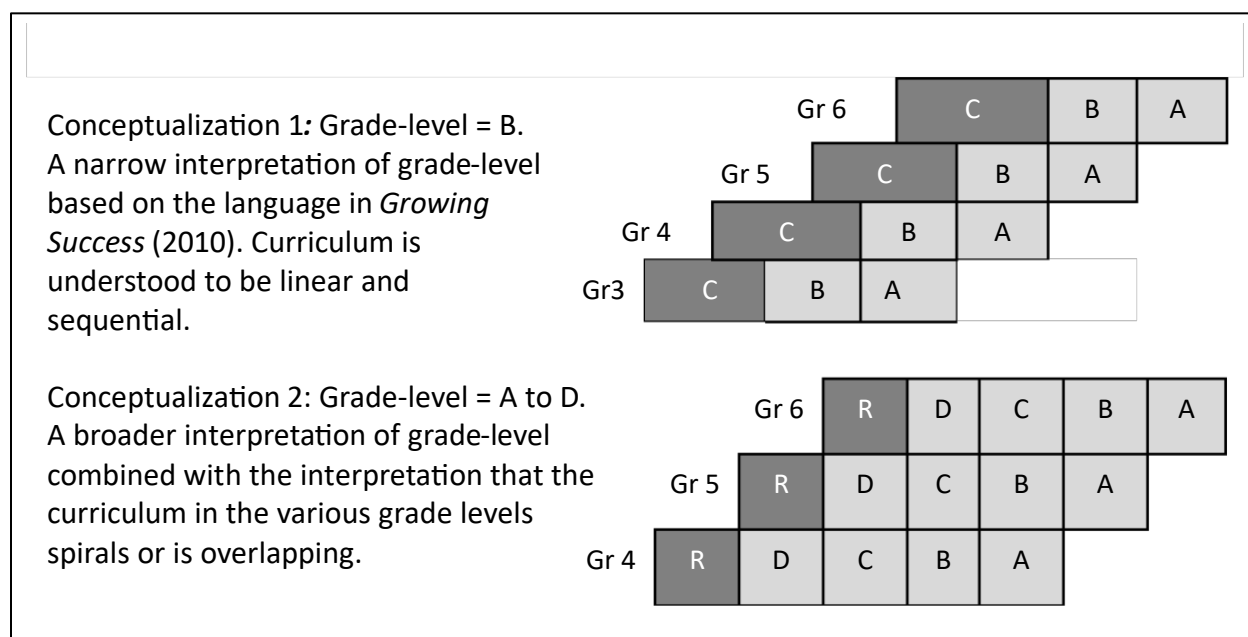
⁶³ Note the conflation between “grade-level” and “provincial standard” at a Level 3 (B) as explained in Chapter 5. This conflicts with Administrator 2's understanding that a 51% (D) is also a pass.

that's different. But that Level 1 is still-- they're still successful at that grade level, you know?

In Figure 6.2, I provide a visual representation of two different achievement level/grade-level conceptions that emerged in the interviews and focus groups. The first example reflects participants who considered Level 2s (C's) to be below grade level (Chapter 5) and described matching the student's Level 2 (C) work sample to a Level 3 (B) exemplar from a different grade. With this conception, a student in Grade 6 Writing receiving a Level 2 (C) could be estimated to be at a Grade 3, 4 or 5 level—potentially a gap of several years—depending on how wide or narrow they interpret the standards of each grade to be.

Figure 6.2

Examples of Conceptualizations of Achievement Levels and Grade-Levels



Note: These representations illustrate two of many possible conceptualizations. The dark grey boxes indicate the achievement level that is perceived to be below grade-level. The light grey boxes represent achievement levels that are perceived to be at grade-level.

Meanwhile, some participants had broader conceptions of grade-level performance, with Levels 1-4 (D's-A's) all being at grade-level but with perhaps with different degrees of sophistication. This view, intra-acting with the understanding that the curriculum of different grade levels overlaps to some degree, produces and understanding that a student in one grade may submit work of a very similar quality to a student in another grade. As one participant explained, "If somebody's working at a Grade 5-- like [a Grade] 7 working at a Grade 5 Level 3,

really, how much of a difference is a Grade 5 Level 3 and a Grade 7? It's not significantly different" (Administrator). With this conception, a student in Grade 6 Writing receiving below a Level 1 (R) could be estimated to be at a Grade 5—only 1 Grade-level behind.

Throughout the interviews and focus groups it was apparent that participants were drawing from different conceptualizations of how grades and grade-levels relate—sometimes consciously and sometimes not. In the following excerpt, a Grade 3 teacher demonstrates how her implicit conception of achievement levels, grade-levels, and curriculum design informed the decision to advance the student's modified program:

Interviewer: So, [she's modified] to Grade 2 for Math right now and Grade 1 for Language? ...At what point do you think she might move to Grade 3 Math?

Sophia, Grade 2/3 Teacher: So, me personally, if she was showing success. Like if she was showing a Level 3 [B's] consistently, and then 4 [A's], it's like, 'oh, now she's producing, you know, [pause] 'she's achieving above Grade 2 expectations. Now let's try grade 3.' That's how I would... Yeah...

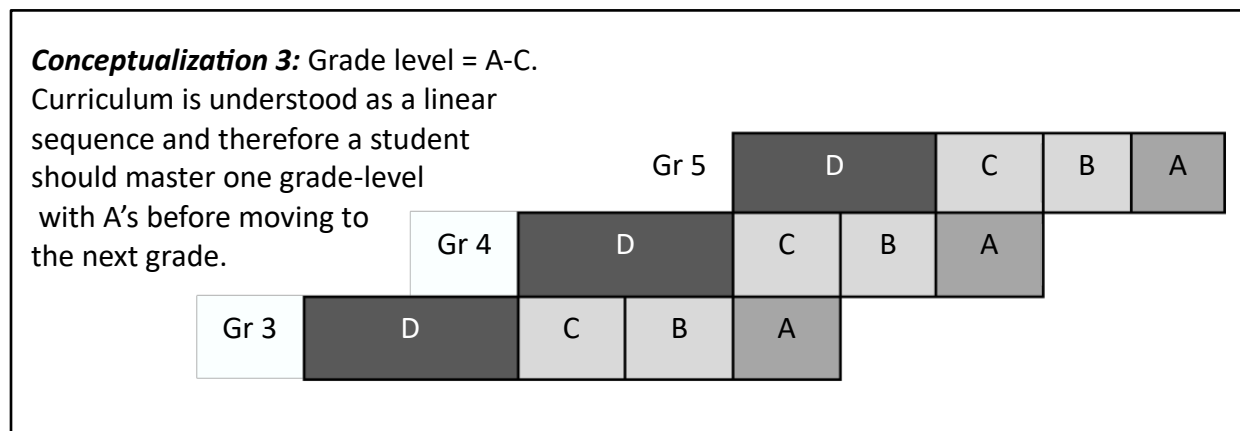
Interviewer: So, what do you think her grades will end up being at the end of the year on the modified program?

Sophia, Grade 2/3 Teacher: She'll be at a B. I'm hoping [pained expression]? That'd be a B in Grade 1 [in Writing]. I would love it to be an A so we can move her to Grade 2 but I think it's gonna be a B again...

Interviewer: And if it is a B then you think she would continue at Grade 1 next year?

Sophia, Grade 2/3 Teacher: ...I don't know. I think, I think that's how we did it this year. I don't know if that's the right way. Like, if you just continue with Grade 1. But I would hope that we could close the gaps, and she makes some strides over the summer. Right?

In *Growing Success*, Level 4 (A) is described as “achievement that surpasses the provincial standard” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 18), which is often interpreted as the student is performing *above* grade-level (Chapter 5). This interpretation, when interacting with an understanding that the curriculum follows a sequential design, produces a conceptualization where it is only once a student has mastered one level that they can attempt the next (Figure 6.3).

Figure 6.3*A Third Conceptualization of Achievement Levels and Grade Levels*

Note. The dark grey boxes indicate the achievement level that is perceived to be below grade-level. The light grey boxes represent achievement levels that are perceived to be at grade-level. The medium grey represents “above grade level” which, in this conceptualization, is what a student must achieve before they can move to the next grade.

If we were to apply this same logic to students without curriculum modifications, it would mean that only students earning A's would pass the course and advance to the next grade level—an impossibly high standard that may partially explain why so few students are taken off Modified IEPs during their time in the Board's elementary schools (Chapter 4).

In this section, I do not intend to position one achievement level/grade-level conceptualization as correct and the others wrong. Rather, I am highlighting how educators' interpretations of curriculum and evaluation policies produce a variety of conceptualizations that serve as apparatuses in special education decisions. This highly individualized *Apparatuses of Grade-Level Conceptualization* in turn intra-acts with the many other material-discursive apparatuses to produce inconsistency and variability in the decision to initiate Modified IEPs. Although this study did not set out to observe patterns of how curriculum and achievement levels are conceptualized across different educators and schools, it emerged as an important area for future research as geo-spatial patterns of conceptualizations could help explain stratified enactments of Modified IEPs.

6.3 – A Policy Haunting and the Ghosts of a Norm Referenced Past

When Ontario first implemented the standards-based grading policy, Ruth Sutton, an expert panelist in the TVO professional development series, described the problem of “norm-

referenced thinking in a criterion-referenced world” (Ontario Ministry of Education & Training, 1999, min. 37:24). Over 25 years later, this study shows that the ghosts of a norm-referenced past are reanimated in at least two different ways: the reliance on contextual frames of reference to judge grade-level performance, and the difficulty separating behaviour from academic achievement. These norm-referenced hauntings contribute to the variability in grading, grade-level determinations, and ultimately IEP decisions.

Frames of Reference

In the absence of clearly defined standards, participants in this study frequently described how interpretations of student performance were dependent on frames of reference when making grading and grade-level decisions, and that there was a lot of variation among educators:

I can say it's a Grade 2 and [Tracey] could say, 'No way, that's a Grade 3. My Grade 3's write like that in my school'... [You] can take that same piece of work to the next school and maybe they're a higher, you know... maybe their scores are higher on EQAO than your school. And those teachers would say, 'Oh no, that's a Level 1.' But you just gave it a 4 at your school. Right? (Donna, Administrator)

I have kids who go to a school [close to] the school I'm at, and I was teaching Grade 6 when both my kids were in Grade 6. And my students' Grade 6 stuff was like years ahead of what my own kids were bringing home. And my kids were getting A's! And... our teachers are giving Grade 5s essays with like, theses, and my oldest daughter in Grade 9, I don't know if she's even written an essay this year. (Alana, SSEL)

Educators inevitably draw on personal frames of reference when judging student performance. These are largely shaped by their experiences, both personal (what their own kids are able to do) and professional (prior teaching assignments). This reliance is particularly challenging for beginning teachers, teachers with new assignments, and for teachers working with a student whose program expectations differ from the rest of the class. Compounding this challenge is the fact that these frames of reference are often shaped by the specific classroom, school, and neighbourhood contexts, leaving ample room for implicit biases about students' abilities and potential based on stereotypes about communities.

There still is a lot of confusion, I think, in my school community because it is pretty high functioning. There's not an understanding of what the provincial standard really is, and we hold... [students] to a much higher standard. And so, if they don't understand something right away, it's like 'They need to be modified! That's it. They don't get it. They don't get it. They're not capable.' Uh, 'we need a psycho-ed assessment.' (Alana, SSEL)

I mean, our school is different in a sense that like a lot of them are, uh, C and D students, and even lower than that... We've had IEPs come from other schools. When you get OSRs, it's so interesting to me. You can tell what type of school the child has come from because you're like, 'clearly this is not anything like our school,' uh, because there's a lot of accommodated IEPs. Or, you know, a student got a D on their report card. So... that's the only reason why there's an IEP there. So, it's very interesting... You can point out a student who really stands out like a sore thumb when really, they're just, you know, they're a C or D student. But in some schools... you know, because they're like the lowest of the bunch, I guess, they really feel like they need to implement an IEP. Which I would not be doing. (Laura, SSEL)

One strategy used to reduce variation in grading due to frames of reference is called moderated marking, which is described below.

Moderated Marking

Moderated marking is a practice whereby groups of teachers evaluate student work together, attempting to come to consensus on what each achievement level looks like. Many participants described the value and importance of this activity but also acknowledged how seldom it took place.

Doing moderated marking...[was] hugely eye-opening to see what other teachers thought, and share best practices, and come to a consensus for our division... It doesn't happen now, so teachers are generally working in their silos to decide... what is at grade-level and what's not... [We] don't have a way for teachers to decide together. It's very individually based. (Kimberly, Administrator)

Despite recognizing the value of moderated marking, there are significant barriers to doing it, primarily, finding the time for teachers to come together to collaborate. One administrator described the scarcity of time for meeting with staff:

We never have enough time, right? I tend to do most of my modeling and professional learning through conversations with them in the hallway as they're walking to the bathroom. Like, that's where I'm fitting things in. I'm not fitting it in PD sessions. I'm not fitting it in during lunch-and-learns or anything like that. It's like, I will talk to them, and they will talk to me at any moment in the day. I'll go out on yard duty, and we'll talk for 15 minutes as we're walking. And I find that with my staff, at least they're receptive to that because it maximizes their time. Um, they're burnt out. They don't want to take time out of their [lunch] to do something else because they're just-- they're tired. (Donna, Administrator)

Participants consistently reported that it was nearly impossible to release staff for opportunities to come together for routine moderated marking. This absence of release time and other structures that support moderated marking are therefore entangled in the apparatus, sustaining

individualized grading practices and frames of reference, and ultimately amplifying variability in IEP decisions.

The Inseparability of Behaviour, Relationships and Academic Performance

It is well-established that teachers' grading decisions are not solely based on the quality of student work but rather a combination of factors such as perceptions of the student's effort, progress, mindset, engagement, participation, behaviour, and more (Cross & Frary, 1999; McMillan et al., 2002). Despite criterion-based evaluation policies and genuine efforts to separate these factors from academic evaluations, the effects of behaviour and relationships have proven hard to compartmentalize. Participants in this study frequently voiced two issues that demonstrate the inseparability of behaviour and academic performance: negative teacher/student relationships, and student work refusals.

Teacher and Student Relationships

Although all ten teacher participants reported having positive relationship with their students, several of the SSEL and administrator participants described how a breakdown in relationship between teacher and student can drive the initiation of a Modified IEP. One SSEL in a middle school explained how this was particularly true for students with Accommodation-only IEPs in classes with teachers who were resistant to providing the entitled accommodations:

That's what I struggle with the most. Where the interaction between the student and teachers is not as good... There's definitely more tension between students, especially our 8s, who just need more accommodations and-and they just need to see things differently now and again. And there becomes a real strain because you'll see behavior. And the behavior comes out because the students aren't feeling really successful, right? Like, that's usually one of the driving factors. So, but it's also a teacher's unwillingness to kind of work with it to say, "Okay, well, what can we do different?" It's just, "You're not doing what I want you to do." (Lucas, SSEL)

When relationships break down, students often shut down and stop producing their best work. One teacher described how relationships, teaching styles, and classroom dynamics can alter the student's need for an IEP from year to year:

Sometimes [opinions differ] within the school. Like a teacher from last year says, 'Well, no, [he] was achieving these [levels] last year. What's going on this year? ... Sometimes, it's-- um, maybe the previous teacher's program, or previous teacher's teaching style that differs. Or maybe it's just, you know, the connection between the student and the teacher. Sometimes it's the dynamics of the entire classroom, the management of the classroom. Um, we've had students this year who are thriving and doing well, who were red flags last year. And even some of us were like, 'What? No way! That student is an angel! You

know, does great. Is achieving well.’ While the teacher last year says, ‘Well, no, that student was like in the office every day last year’ type of thing. So sometimes, it does come down to the teacher or the classroom dynamics or the structure or the program being delivered by a teacher as well. (Selena, Grade 3/4 Teacher)

Unfortunately, it is likely that in some cases, conflicts between students and teachers play a role in the apparatuses that produce “inappropriate” Modified IEPs. However, there is a significant danger in reducing the proliferation of Modified IEPs to teacher behaviour alone. As discussed in Chapter 7, simplistic explanations that solely situate “fault” in the teacher’s attitude, relationships, or pedagogy, camouflage the systemic forces in the apparatuses that are also responsible for producing the problems. Obscuring the system’s responsibility with discourses of the “bad teacher” risks exempting it from essential change.

Student Frustration and Work Refusals

As stated above, all ten teacher participants described having positive relationships with the students they were supporting. Despite significant challenges and frustrations, their dedication and care for their students was indisputable. Yet, many of them faced significant challenges assessing their student’s academic achievement when their student was overwhelmed and refused to attempt the assignments.

In the beginning of the school year, he would literally just sit there staring at his paper [saying] ‘I don’t know what to write.’ And even when I would give him a sentence to write, just say for spelling, he would not attempt it. (Selena, Grade 3 teacher)

With this particular child. She's absolutely lovely, but when she's frustrated, she shuts down. So, if it's a piece of writing where she says, ‘I can't do it’ no matter what you say, or, you know, ‘tell me...and I’ll write down information’ like, you know, ‘Miss [last name] will scribe for you. Or do you prefer Miss [Resource Teacher]? or Miss [ELL Teacher] in the ELL room?’ She just says no. So, when she's not in the mood, or she just doesn't want to, she just shuts down. (Sophia, Grade 2/3 Teacher)

Supporting a student who is overwhelmed, anxious, and convinced that they cannot complete a task is not always just a matter of creating a safer classroom culture, providing more differentiation, or simply encouraging the child—it is an emotionally charged experience with structural constraints that leave teachers without many options for evaluating the student’s achievement level no matter how much care and support they offer. The following excerpt comes from an interview with a highly experienced Grade 6 teacher working with a student with a diagnosis of ADHD and, as she said, “trauma,” in an extremely busy classroom where there were 13 other students identified with significant learning needs:

Interviewer: So, when you're evaluating him in Math, is he “incomplete” when you are scribing?

Barbara, Grade 5/6 Teacher: Oh yeah. He's just like [deflating sound effect]. ‘I’m not doing this.’ He's so frustrated, right? Like... this is the kid. Like you never get mad at him because you can see [how frustrated he is]. I mean, I'm frustrated on his behalf as you can probably tell.

Interviewer: Yeah. Tell me more. Like, how does it feel working with him?

Barbara, Grade 5/6 Teacher: Totally annoying. I like him. I was glad that he was in my class. I asked for him to be in my class, and, uh, you know. And I've met him before, and I was aware of his-his challenges, and, um, really liked the parent, and thought we could do things together. And then that was when I thought I'd have a class of 20, not realizing I was gonna start the year with a class of 26. And he's not the only, you know, student who has needs beyond what the regular classroom can support. Um, so, yeah, I am frustrated. I feel like this is a year that he had an opportunity to make some great leaps, and we haven't been able to do it.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Um, so, what grade level would you put him at in math?

Barbara, Grade 5/6 Teacher: [Grade] three, four, somewhere in there. [It] depends. Except for, again, financial literacy and coding where he's at grade-level. And I made sure to put that in the report card comment because, I couldn't give him an overall mark⁶⁴ really because there're all the other strands missing.

Interviewer: So, what grade- what grade did he get in Math then?

Barbara, Grade 5/6 Teacher: “I” [Insufficient evidence]. He didn't-- he couldn't complete three out of the five strands.

Despite the shift towards a criterion-referenced evaluation policy, student behaviour and academic performance are deeply entangled withing an apparatus of student performance, often shifting in response to context, relationships, emotional states, and a student’s sense of safety and belonging. This section is not meant to argue for greater efforts to separate the two, but rather to highlight this additional driver of the inconsistency and variability in grading and IEP decisions.

⁶⁴ Under the 2005 Math curriculum, teachers reported student achievement in five separate strands: number sense and numeration, patterning and algebra, measurement, geometry and special sense, and data management and probability. The new math curriculum introduced in the fall of 2020 is reported on with one single grade for all strands which presents some additional challenges, as outlined in the following section.

6.4 – Curricular Emphasis and the Limitations of a Single Grade

Another significant force in the Apparatus of Variability in Grading and Grade-Level Determinations comes from how teachers reduce a wide variety of grades, on a wide variety of assignments, evaluating a wide variety of skills, to a single grade to represent them all. Every subject area has a mix of technical and wholistic skills, but how they are weighted within assignments, across assignments, and in the formulation of a final grade, is based on each teacher’s professional judgement. Educators often have strong opinions about the relative value of the technical versus wholistic skills in a subject area. And, while both should be taught and evaluated throughout the year, decisions regarding their relative weights must be made at report card time when they are reduced to a single grade.

When one participant was describing how moderated marking works, the tension between differing views of the relative value of technical and wholistic skills was apparent:

So, when we did moderated marking, we'd sit as a team and... there would be discussions. Like I would say, 'I think that looks more like a Level 3+. And then the other teacher would be like 'No, you might be too easy, because I see a lot of mistakes in their piece of writing.' I'm like, 'but there's voice there's so much, you know, content. It's, you know, [has a] beginning, middle, and end. It's like a critical piece where they're able to explain their thinking and the problem is so well developed.' 'I disagree like, yeah, it's not a 4, because of XYZ.' (Sophia, Grade 2/3 Teacher)

In a rubric, teachers usually provide separate grades for the several skills being evaluated, and feedback is provided for how to improve in each area. However, current reporting policies outlined in *Growing Success* (2010) and the Ontario provincial report card require these diverse assessments to be reduced to a single grade—a single grade that then strongly influences the decision to initiate a Modified IEP.

This poses challenges for all students, but is especially challenging for students whose learning profiles are more “spikey” (Glass & Yuill, 2024)—tremendous strengths in some areas but significant difficulties in others.⁶⁵ For example, in Math, some students might excel in visual-spatial areas (e.g., patterning, geometry) but struggle with the memorization of math facts (e.g., multiplication tables) or operations (e.g., addition, subtraction, division) (Lambert, 2018).⁶⁶ In Writing, some students can write beautiful stories but have difficulty spelling simple words. In

⁶⁵ Students identified as dyslexic or autistic (or both) have been documented as having more “spikey” profiles making the reduction of their performance into a single grade even more challenging and problematic (Glass & Yuill, 2024; Lambert, 2018).

⁶⁶ See Lambert (2018) for an excellent article on the often-overlooked strengths of dyslexic students in Math.

Reading, some students may demonstrate sophisticated analyses of texts but struggle to decode. When participants were asked: When you have a student who is quite strong at making connections, inferences, questioning, retelling, summarizing, etcetera, but struggles with decoding, what do you do with their grade in Reading?

I think that some teachers... think 'I'm in junior, I don't have to do decoding... I'm not gonna report on that so I don't have to worry about it. We're gonna do summarizing and inferencing and all those other things.' (Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher)

What do I do with the actual mark? Uh, I sort of just temper the mark based on, you know, the reading response work and how they decode or how they read. Um, yeah, it's not like a 50/50 thing... I don't know if I would ever give a B if they don't know how to decode. (Selena, Grade 3 Teacher)

In one instance, a Grade 5 teacher felt that their student was below grade-level because he struggled with the memorization and fluency of multiplication facts (even though he understood multiplication conceptually and was able to use a multiplication chart successfully). She explained that it was up to a teacher's personal discretion as to how these skills would be weighted:

I would say, basically, maybe students are understanding what multiplying means. And then, I think it depends on what, personally... you think you should do with multiplication facts. I think, I think memorizing some of it would be helpful, like just knowing [the result] right off the bat. (Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher)

A Grade 3 teacher described how their ELL student with a Learning Disability wasn't progressing in their Grade 1 modified Math curriculum. While the student could compute the correct answer, they struggled to explain their thinking:

So, even just how do we make tens... the kids could easily say 9 plus 1, 8 plus 2, 7 plus 3, right? This child would go 'What are we making again?' I said '10. Simple 10... So, it's one plus what?' and she'll be like, 'I think it's 9.' So, she'll get the right answer. 'Can you explain why you think it's 9?' 'I just think it's 9.' You know, so kids could show it in different ways. Use their fingers. This child would just: 'I don't know why I know it... I can't explain it.' (Sophia, Grade 2/3 Teacher)

There is no doubt that all of these skills are important and should be taught and assessed (at least formatively). But there are vastly different views on which skills should form the threshold for passing or failing a student. As one administrator described, "it becomes really muddy because you can be meeting your curriculum expectations of your grade level for certain things and not for others. And then how does the teacher then decide, you know, what your grade is?" (Victor,

Administrator). Teachers' idiosyncratic curricular foci partially explain why some students can move on through the elementary panel without memorizing their multiplication tables, and others are perpetually modified to Grade 3 for the same lack of skills. Or why some might graduate without ever learning the sounds of the letters, while others may be retained at a "Kindergarten reading level" indefinitely—a case that prompted one participant to remark in disbelief, "We have one kid who's in a Grade 5 class that's reading at a kindergarten level!" (Sharon, SSEL). As the quote from Thomas Guskey (2011) in Chapter 5 suggests, attempting to represent student performance in a single grade is as absurd as "combining measures of height, weight, diet, and exercise into a single number or mark to represent a person's physical condition" (2011, p. 4). The requirement to do so therefore plays a forceful role in the apparatus of grading, amplifying the production of variability in report card grades across teachers and schools. Such different evaluations of student performance in turn produces conflicting opinions on when and why a Modified IEP should be initiated—a phenomenon with real material consequences at the school, classroom, and individual student level. In the final section of this chapter, I present a case that emerged from one of the teacher interviews that illustrates the lived experience of the effects of the variability in grading and grade-level determinations.

6.5 – Conflicting Opinions of when to Initiate Curriculum Modifications

Through Sections 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4, I have traced the Apparatus of Variability of Grading and Grade-level Determinations as well as several additional sub-apparatuses that produce it. These material-discursive configurations include forces of *de facto* curriculum standards, conceptualizations of grade-level performance, ghosts of a norm-referenced past, and the reduction of student performance into a single grade—all of which are ever-shifting apparatuses in their own right. These entangled apparatuses produce inconsistency and variability in grading, grade-level estimations, and the subsequent IEP decisions, which sometime results in conflicts among educators in a school, or even between schools and families.

Almost every participant in this study described having to navigate differing opinions on IEP decisions within their schools:

So, I go back to report cards, and I'll have a student who had, like, had a B in math last year, and then [the current teacher] wants to modify back. And I'm like, "but they already passed!" (Alana, SSEL).

At my school, a lot of times what happens is we have a little bit of a problem between the primary and the junior division. The primary division, um, is easy-going because the kids are young, and they're cute, and they're innocent, and they're trying their best. And then we get to the junior grades, and they turn around and [the junior teacher is] like, '[Sharon], like really!?! This child got like A's and B's. The kid can hardly even read. Like really!?!' (Sharon, SSEL)

A colleague's student came to class clearly needing modifications. When they went back to her report card, she was virtual last year and was receiving A's, but clearly, could not do grade-level work. So, it was like, what do you do? Right? And the question was, how did this teacher possibly give this student A's when this is what they're producing? And that's happened in some instances. Or if they've come from another school. We have a lot of students who will switch from private school to the public system or were in the public system then went to private school, then came back to the public system. Um, and then again, the report cards reflect marks that differ from what the teacher is seeing. (Selena, Grade 3 Teacher)

The following excerpt from an interview with a Grade 6 teacher illustrates how several of the apparatuses outlined in this chapter produced differences in opinion about one student's need for a Modified IEP. Consequently, these differing opinions caused a frustrating ordeal for a student and their family:

Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher: And then last year... [student] was taken off her IEP by the Grade 5 teacher because, you know, the teacher felt that she was up to grade-level and ready. Like, 'Good to go!' And the parents were [like], 'Hey, this is great. My child's caught up! We're feeling good!

And then this year came in and it was like-- I think she actually scored worse than [student 2] in all of these reading assessments... And again, this is a kid who was taken off her IEP last year... Meanwhile, it's like, 'No, she's reading at [an] early Grade 3, late Grade 2 level.' And like, it was just-- it was a disaster to start the year. Thankfully, I've known the parents for quite a few years. I taught their older daughter. Um, so everything's fine now and she's made really good strides going through [the] Empower [program]...

Interviewer: I'm really interested in how the Grade 5 teacher was just like, 'No, she doesn't need an IEP.' And then you, in Grade 6, are like, 'We've done these diagnostics. She is three to four years below grade-level'...

Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher: Okay, okay. Um, I'm gonna be honest with you in saying that the Grade 5 teacher does not do any running records or, uh, decoding assessments at all. And never has and never will. So, when she says that a student is at a Grade 5 reading level, it's because she did [an assessment called] CASSI and saw that the student wrote that much and says, 'Well, that's a Grade 5 level response.' And done. 'Your daughter's caught up!' When in actuality, yes, [student] can write as long as she wants because she's quite bright and very personable and, you know, has a good way of conversing and can

transfer that conversing into writing. But if you ask her to write a summary, it's one sentence on what happened in the passage, and it's 10 sentences about something else she knows about that is tangentially related to the passage...It's sometimes easier to have conversations-- those [positive] conversations with parents rather than the other thing where it's like, 'Listen, your kid is still really struggling.'

Ultimately, this chapter highlights how the high-stakes decision of modifying a student's curriculum is often based on assessment information that is highly subjective and could vary significantly from teacher to teacher.

Building on the analysis in Chapter 5 where I demonstrated that a large proportion of Modified IEPs are initiated following a misinterpretation of what constitutes a failing grade, this chapter provides further evidence for my central thesis that the decision to modify a student's program is often more reflective of the complex forces circulating in the curriculum modification ecosystem, than simply the student's inherent needs. In the following chapters, I continue to build on this central thesis by probing deeper into the entangled apparatuses that produce variability in grades, grade level determinations, and ultimately, IEP decisions by examining the social-emotional forces in the ecosystem.

Chapter 7: Results and Discussion

Dilemmas and Discourses of “Good Teachers” and “Bad Teachers”: Tracing the Social Forces in the Curriculum Modification Ecology

Schools and teachers, whatever their strengths and weaknesses, are complex places and people full of light and shade and deserving of thoughtful consideration, not quick judgement. (Bibby, 2010, p. 150)

As described in Chapters 1 and 2, I found myself stuck at the analysis stage for a very long time. In hindsight, part of my difficulty was with reconciling the knowledge I brought to the project with the knowledge that emerged through engaging with it—a cognitive dissonance that unsettled my sense of direction in the ecosystem. I entered the research believing many of the “bad teacher” discourses I now seek to deconstruct, and it was only by shifting from a critical methodology to a diffractive one that a more agonist analysis became available to me. As Donna Haraway (2018) writes,

Reflexivity has been much recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere, setting up the worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and really real...Diffraction, the production of difference patterns, might be a more useful metaphor for the needed work than reflexivity. (pp. 15, 30)

A diffractive approach helped me understand my cognitive dissonance as “patterns of difference that make a difference” (Barad, 2007, Loc. 1694). By diffracting my own beliefs with the participants’ stories, a new opening for understanding emerged—an understanding that the decision to initiate a Modified IEP occurs in what Honig (1996) calls a *dilemmatic space*.

Drawing from the works of Bernard Williams, Honig (1996) distinguishes between a dilemma as an event—“situations in which two [or more] values, obligations, or commitments conflict and there seems to be no right thing to do” (p. 288) and a dilemmatic space—the metaphorical terrain where conflicts between multiple “oughts” (i.e., desires, values, commitments) unfold. She argues that conceptualizing dilemmas within a metaphorical space

calls attention to the institutional and discursive constructions of value conflicts or struggles as dilemmas.... [and can] serve as a site from which to interrogate and perhaps even transcend the very decidable ordinary rules and cultural constructs... Dilemmas appear not only as specters of agentic fragmentation but also always as markers of a

potential space of (gender) politics, empowerment, and political engagement. (ibid, pp. 259-260)

In other words, understanding the dilemmatic space offers possibilities for new forms of engagement, action, and transformation.

Following Fransson & Grannäs (2013) who apply the concept of dilemmatic space to educational contexts, and Pasquini and DeLuca (2021) who extend it to teacher grading practices, I apply a Baradian reading of Honig's (1996) dilemmatic space to the decision to initiate a Modified IEP. In applying the Baradian framework to Honig's dilemmatic space, I reconfigure it as a *dilemmatic apparatus*—a material-discursive configuration where multiple “oughts” converge with other material-discursive forces to produce what becomes recognizable as a dilemma. In addition to improving methodological coherence, this reading is helpful for several reasons. First, while Honig's version highlights multiple human desires, a Baradian reading extends this to include other material-discursive forces and illuminates how the human desires are produced. Second, a Baradian lens emphasizes intra-actions—the dynamic pushing and pulling through which decisions take shape. Finally, a Baradian lens decenters human agency by recognizing the agentic capacities of the non-human forces entangled in the apparatus. With this recentering, dilemmas and decisions are therefore not situated within the individual alone which, as I argue in Section 7.2, helps redirect discourses of blame from individuals towards the system in which the individuals are constrained. Through this analysis, I come to make sense of participant decisions in a more agonistic way and as a site of ongoing tension rather than a resolution.

In this chapter, I trace several forces observed within participants' dilemmatic apparatuses and examine the effects these apparatuses produce. By describing the relations among these forces, I show how competing professional, ethical, and institutional demands cause persistent tensions in teachers' decision making. These tensions do not resolve into clear right or wrong choices—only complicated ones. In Section 7.1, I trace how teacher desires are entangled with ethical standards, the duality of IEPs (Chapter 4), another policy vacuum, and discourses of “good teaching” and “the good teacher.” In Section 7.2, I diffract “bad teacher” discourses through the lived dilemmas of participants, demonstrating that the dilemmatic apparatuses of “the bad teacher” may be much more complex than the discourses imply. Together, these sections

demonstrate that the decision to initiate a Modified IEP is produced by several ecological forces and not reducible to the objective need of the individual student.

7.1 – Dilemmatic Apparatuses of the “Good Teacher”

The most salient observation in almost all of the teacher interviews was that there was a genuine desire to help their students feel successful at school. This desire materialized in different ways, including the desire to protect students from the harm of disappointing grades, the desire to reduce student frustration, and the desire to ensure continuity of programming and the momentum of success through documentation. Intra-acting with these desires were the additional forces of IEP discourses, pressures to perform “the good teacher,” tensions between the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT)’s ethical standards. These dynamics will be illustrated in this section, but first, brief explanations of three additional apparatuses/forces are provided below as they require a bit of explanation.

First, as explained in Chapter 4, there are contradictory discourses about the harm and benefit of IEPs due to special education’s history of both protecting students’ rights and reinforcing inequality (Domina et al., 2017). This duality, intra-acts with what Artiles calls a *paradox of educational equity* (American Educational Research Association, 2016), and the conflation of Accommodation-only and Modified IEPs (Chapter 3), to produce *The Apparatus of Monolithic Discourses of IEP Protection or Harm* (Chapter 4). This force emerged as a particularly strong force in several participants’ dilemmatic apparatuses. For example, almost all participants in this study described their school as being “very careful” about who gets an IEP. Although “very careful” was rarely defined, it quickly became apparent that the expression carried different meanings depending on participants’ perceived value of special education for the students they were working with—a product of *The Apparatus of Monolithic Discourses of IEP Protection or Harm*. For those who believed in the benefits of special education, “very careful” meant ensuring that an IEP was initiated as to not let struggling students “fall through the cracks.” For those with a more critical view of special education “very careful” meant navigating the paradox of not wanting to initiate a Modified IEP for a marginalized student but also not wanting to deny their right to one if they were, in fact, disabled. In many cases, as illustrated below, this tension resulted in educators restricting the initiation of Modified IEPs for marginalized students (based on their racial or socio-economic identities) to only those with a formal diagnosis of disability. This move rests on at least two assumptions: first, that the

presence of a disability equates a genuine “need” for curriculum modifications; and second, that the presence of a disability will mean that the modifications will be more beneficial to the student based on their markers of disability than harmful based on their markers of race. What is needed is a far more nuanced understanding of curriculum modifications in order to make sound decisions regarding who will genuinely benefit from them—an overarching goal of this research.

Second, the OCT outlines five professional standards of practice and four ethical standards for the teaching profession. The four loosely defined ethical standards include *care*, *respect*, *trust*, and *integrity* (Ontario College of Teachers, 2025). Several teacher participants described experiencing a tension between the standards of *care* and *integrity* when navigating how to support their student—a tension that was easily reconciled with the initiation of a Modified IEP.

Finally, performing “the good teacher” refers to how teachers embody or enact discourses of “the good teacher.” As Moore (2004) explains,

All of us carry, of course, however provisionally, a notion of what we need to be doing and achieving in order to be happy with our professional actions and our corresponding relationships, and to feel that we are performing to the best of our abilities... This notion of the ideal professional self that we carry with us will have been constructed from a wide variety of (re)sources over time and through social experience rather than having ‘appeared’ somehow as the internalisation of some universal truth. (p. 9)

This is to say, that there are no universal conceptions of “the good teacher” but rather individualized constructions of them produced through the intra-actions of a variety of forces—an apparatus of good teacher discourses. Throughout this project I made a concerted effort to attend to participants’ constructions of “the good teacher,” recognizing the “‘complex of overlapping, agonistic and antagonistic discourses’ which ‘swarm and seethe around the teacher’” (Ball, 1999 cited in Moore, 2004, p. 14).

Having outlined these three forces (which were produced through material-discursive apparatuses in their own right), I now shift to illustrate how they entangle with teacher desires within *dilemmatic apparatuses* to produce “complex situations in which there is rarely an exclusively “right” or “wrong” solution—only, simply, a way of ‘acting for the best’” (Pasquini & DeLuca, 2021). Because the forces and configurations of these apparatuses are so much more complex than my simplified tracings can represent, it may be helpful to think of them as ingredients in a pot of soup, where the recipe (a dilemmatic apparatus) is made and remade each time it is cooked, and the ingredients (often, but not always, the same ones in the same

proportions) blend together, altering one another's flavour until what emerges can no longer be traced back to any single component. Several ingredients and their transformations are described below.

A Desire to Protect Students from the Harm of Undesired Grades

Beginning as early as kindergarten, students are inundated with messages about their academic ability, potential, and position within the schooling hierarchy (Parekh, 2022b). They are bombarded with stereotypes in media (e.g. Hermione Granger in Harry Potter) and the school environment (e.g., awards, chosen leaders, reading levels), about who is successful in education and who does not belong. Grades play a significant role in conveying these messages. As Schneider and Hutt write,

Bad grades make official what many students already feel about themselves: that they are not good at academic work... While grades can motivate some students to work harder in school, at least at particular kinds of tasks, they can also have a demotivating effect. Students with 4.0 grade point averages (GPAs) have a lot to lose. By contrast, their lower-scoring peers... often see little to gain by exerting additional effort. If you're a C or D student, working harder seems like a bad bet... why would you labor for a reward that never arrives? (2023, pp. 25–26)

Working within a system that requires an evaluation practice that is known to cause harm to students (Brookhart et al., 2016; Butler, 1987; Högberg et al., 2021; Pulfrey et al., 2011) puts teachers in a difficult professional-ethical dilemma (Pasquini & DeLuca, 2021). In this study, participants experienced a tension between the OCT ethical standards of *care* and *integrity*. On the one hand, they demonstrated an ethical commitment to honesty and consistency in their grading practices (*integrity*), but on the other hand, they expressed a desire to protect students from the emotional consequence of the grades their integrity produced (*care*).

In Ontario's current policy context, Modified IEPs unintentionally provide an effective way of avoiding having to issue undesired grades (B's, C's, D's, R's, or I's depending on the person's perspective) without compromising one's integrity in grading. As explained in Chapter 3, when a student has a Modified IEP, their grades are no longer based on the standard provincial curriculum but rather on expectations the teacher writes into the IEP. This puts the achievement levels defined in *Growing Success* in conversation with each student's IEP: if a student meets the expectations the teacher put in their IEP, they receive a B. If they exceed IEP expectations, they receive an A, and if they have not yet reached IEP expectations, they receive a C (Ontario

Ministry of Education, 2010). Effectively, this allows teachers to assign higher grades to students perceived to be working below “grade-level.”

When participants in this study were asked if it was better for a student to receive a B on a modified program or a D on the standard program, most answered that a B would be better for the student:

I think it's better to have the modification and, you know, feel that level of success... Like, how is it gonna feel for that kid? You get D after D after D after D with no kind of idea of why you're getting it. “I'm trying my very best, and all that's coming up on my report card are Ds!” (Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher)

Personally, I find children who see failure... then the next time they're so discouraged. “I don't even get a D” So, I would much rather them produce a B and see “Oh, I have these, these gains.” (Sophia, Grade 2/3 Teacher)

When asked to consider the potential consequences of curriculum modifications, one Grade 3 teacher explained that while there were some drawbacks, the benefits of preventing her student from experiencing the emotional repercussions of low grades outweighed these consequences:

Interviewer: Are there any drawbacks to using curriculum modifications?

Sophia, Grade 2/3 Teacher: [thinking] You know what? [sigh, pause] There's definitely pros and cons. Right? Because she might be seeing success, but it's almost like a false reality. If that makes sense. Right? Because at the same time she's not really achieving a Level 3. It's a Level 3 in Grade 1. So, are we really closing the gaps? Right? Because on the same token, I want to move her. If I could, I would move her right to a Grade 2 right away. But because she wouldn't see success, we have to keep her at a Grade 1.

And even as a parent, I know, and you know, I have people within my own family, right? They're like, I don't want them on an IEP. I don't want them to be modified. I don't want that because, yes, they might see success but it's not a real--.... I rather them to see that D. I'm going to say this is tough love. ‘Look at your D. This is what you deserve. You should be doing only Grade 3.’ And it's, it's a different mentality. And there maybe teachers who agree with that kind of philosophy. But for me, I want them to see success. I want them to see gains. So, if it's small gains, it's still worth it for me. Like, because this child's is happy, she's content with writing, she's able to, you know-- sometimes, yes, it's the pulling teeth, but she'll still do it.

I feel like if she saw Level 1, Level 1, Level 1, Level 1, all the time in Grade 3? I wouldn't even get a Level 1 next time. I might get a blank piece of paper. So, the on the flip side, first achieving like a false sense of a B is still better than her producing, you know, D, and then D minus and then, you know, failing.

Despite the complications, this decision reflects the educator's genuine attempt to preserve the student's well-being through the ethical standard of care, without compromising the ethical

standard of integrity in evaluation practices. Though it may not be the single direct cause of IEP initiation, the means of avoiding the social and emotional consequences of assigning undesired grades is a powerful material-discursive force within the dilemmatic apparatus of the decision to initiate a Modified IEP.

Adding Parental Preferences to the Apparatus

Participants also reported that some parents may try to shield their young children from the negative consequences of lower grades. In some cases, educators and parents face the dilemma of initiating modifications together. One SSEL described two cases in her school where she tried to support families to make informed decisions.

Moderator: Do parents understand that when their child is [on a Modified IEP] the B is on a different grade level?

Alana, SSEL: The mom [of a Grade 5 student] really wanted the IEP. Like she really wanted the Modified IEP. So, we did it. But I made sure I said to her “She's, you know, getting Bs or Cs, ... at her grade level. It's not at Grade 4; it's at Grade 5.” And so, she was like, “Oh, really?” I said, “Yeah!” ... But this mom was really adamant that her program was modified...

I had another little guy... the parents did sit down with me, and they asked a lot of questions about modifications. And they'd done their research because they did ask like, “How is this gonna impact him later?” And so, we had a long-- like probably at least an hour-long conversation about what the difference is between modifications and accommodations... The parents chose not to modify. They said, “Let's just accommodate.” He's working at grade-level now.

In the first case, the parent pushed for her child to stay on a modified program (to a Grade 4 level) rather than returning, as the SSEL was suggesting, to the non-modified Grade 5 curriculum where the child would be earning Bs and Cs. By remaining on a Modified IEP, the child would continue to exceed the Grade 4 expectations in her IEP and achieve higher grades. Conversely, in the second case, the family was more concerned about the long-term implications of Modified IEPs and therefore wanted their child to remain at grade-level with an accommodated-only approach. In both cases, the SSEL honoured the families' preferences while they negotiated their own dilemmatic apparatuses (though with differing decisions) that contained a shared desire to avoid low grades.

A Desire to Reduce Student Frustration

In addition to the desire to protect students from the emotional impact of low grades, teachers' dilemmatic apparatuses are also shaped by a desire to reduce student's frustration level. Almost every teacher participating in this study described the tremendous stress, frustration, and discouragement their students were experiencing. When asked what would happen if their student was given grade-level tasks, they responded:

If you've expected her to do all these things? Oh, the tears! If you saw her the first week of school, it was just tears. It was just tears. Because I was doing-- I was, you know... I didn't know her at all, and I was doing all these assessments that we're speaking of. We're doing DRAs, ONAP, OWAs. All these things. And she was so overwhelmed! And maybe, I guess in hindsight I should have broken it up a little bit. I just wanted to, you know, get the assessment piece in place. But she's like "I'm gonna fail Grade 3." Like that was her first thing. "This is just too hard." So, then I asked her Grade 2 teacher, and ask, did you see this? And yup. The first week of school she wanted to be home every day. So [shrugs]. And now she's fine now. It's okay. It's been modified. It's at her level. She's comfortable with it. (Sophia, Grade 2/3 Teacher)

And, you know, he can get frustrated. He can get frustrated, and he can shut down. And then it can kind of escalate where he might throw something, or he might-- [trails off] He hasn't in a while, which is good 'cause I keep constantly praising him no matter what... And you know? I just want him to feel successful. And if [modifying is] going to give him a sense of feeling successful [shrugs]. Because every child should feel successful. That's going to be, you know, mentally a lot better for him.... I've had others... [who would] get very, very frustrated and would shut down. And that's the last sort of thing that you want. For them to shut down and feel that they don't want to do anything or even try. (Kathryn, Grade 1/2 Teacher)

[Discouraged] to the point where if you ask him to come and sit with you to do small group work, it's always, "No. No, thank you". He doesn't want to engage in it. And if you try a first-and-then strategy, or try to like, you know, make it more engaging and any which way try to make a game out of it, he catches on and it triggers him. He wants nothing to do with academics to the point where we've had heavy conversation with parents, many meetings and to quote the mother, it is-- she says it is "like hell" for her to try to get him to work with her, it's like pulling teeth. Does not wanna do it at all. A part of me feels that he sees where his peers are at, and he's embarrassed. (Laila, Kindergarten Teacher)

Oh, he'd have a meltdown. (Barbara, Grade 5/6 Teacher)

As with protecting students from low grades, negotiating how to reduce student frustration involves a tension between the ethical standards of *integrity* and *care*. Entangled here are also several principles of "good teaching," such as "meeting them where they're at." As illustrated

below, Modified IEPs reconcile this tension by permitting teachers to perform “the good teacher” without feeling like they have compromised their professional integrity.

Meeting ‘em Where they are at

Meeting a student “where they’re at” is a long-standing characteristic of “good teaching.” Lev Vygotsky introduced the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) in 1932 (Yasnitsky, 2018) and it remains one of the most dominant concepts in education today (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). The ZPD refers to the range between what the student can do independently and what they can do with assistance. The zone represents “the sweet spot” for learning where instruction can effectively support the student to grow beyond their current capabilities (Yasnitsky, 2018). Jerome Bruner’s concept of scaffolding is closely related. *Scaffolding* refers to the temporary support that a teacher (or parent, or peer) provides to help a student reach learning goals in small increments (Bruner, 1976). In classrooms of 20-35 students (depending on the division), there is often a wide range of “sweet spots” for learning, and “good teachers” must customize instruction to reach each student’s particular ZPD (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

The concept of *Differentiated Instruction* (DI) is also closely related. DI is a teaching framework that rejects a one-size-fits-all approach in favor of individualized teaching. DI encourages teachers to design lessons for a variety of learning styles (e.g., reading articles, watching videos, participating in an escape room) and providing a variety of options for students to demonstrate their learning (e.g., essay, podcast, or documentary video). Additionally, DI encourages the provision of “multiple entry points”—different starting points for learning based on students’ prior knowledge and readiness, or in other words, their ZPD (Tomlinson, 2014). As Carol Ann Tomlinson, developer of the DI framework writes,

Differentiation can be defined as an approach to teaching in which teachers proactively modify⁶⁷ curricula, teaching methods, resources, learning activities, and student products to address the diverse needs of individual students and small groups of students to maximize the learning opportunity for each student in a classroom. (Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 121)

⁶⁷ As explained in Chapter 3, Tomlinson does not necessarily use the term “modify” in a special education sense. She uses it in a linguistic sense as in *make adjustment to* which could mean with or without an IEP depending on the regulations of any particular educational jurisdiction.

There are multiple axes on which differentiation can and should occur: how lessons are delivered, how learning is evaluated, and also, where in the curriculum students begin their learning—their “entry points” or the “sweet spots” for each student’s unique ZPD (Tomlinson et al., 2003). With the wide range of learners in any given classroom, sometimes these entry points align with the grade-level curriculum, and sometimes they do not. Where there is ambiguity—another policy vacuum in the curriculum modification ecosystem—is regarding how much variance from the Ontario curriculum is permitted without initiating a formal Modified IEP. Incidentally, this question was raised by several call-in viewers during one of the TVO professional development episodes in the late 1990s when the standardized curriculum and curriculum modifications were first introduced.

In episode 3, “*Accommodating Student Special Needs*,” one caller specifically asked for guidelines for when and how much they could modify the new standardized curriculum.

Caller: “What guidelines do we have for modifying expectations for students? How much latitude can we take in modifying the curriculum?”

MoE Representative, Louise: “Yes, we will be talking about that” (Ontario Ministry of Education & TVOntario, 2000, min 6:15).

The episode continues with two examples of teachers using accommodations and modifications in their classrooms, but the key question of the degree to which the curriculum can be modified with and without an IEP remained unanswered. Later in the episode, the host returned to the question:

Host, Kit Rankin: “Louise, I would like to turn to you. We have had a number of questions about modification⁶⁸ in particular. Can you clarify for us how teachers modify curriculum expectations and to what degree they should make these modifications?”

MoE Representative, Louise: “Well, Kit. The expectation really is that the Ontario curriculum is for all students. So, to whatever extent is possible, all students should be working on the Ontario curriculum. The level of curriculum modification that will need to happen will depend on the individual student’s strengths and needs. (Ontario Ministry of Education & TVOntario, 2000, min 17:50).

Although the MoE representative implies that with a Modified IEP, the curriculum can be modified as much as any student needs, the question of how much the curriculum can be

⁶⁸ In this case, the term “modification” was specifically referencing curriculum modifications in the contexts of IEPs.

adjusted *without* a Modified IEP was not addressed. Over 25 years later, this question remains unanswered, leaving individual teachers to decide the threshold for themselves.

Teachers in this study often reported that Modified IEPs gave them the latitude to meet the student where they are at and scaffold them forward through differentiated instruction—to be “the good teacher”—that would not otherwise be permissible. Each participant in the study seemed to have a different threshold for how much latitude could be taken without compromising the ethical standard of *integrity*. These forces also intra-acted with the curriculum context (e.g., Math vs Language), the teacher’s curricular emphasis (Chapter 6), and the student’s context (e.g., how far below grade-level the entry point was). One Grade 6 teacher described the dilemma as she experienced it:

Interviewer: Do you feel like you can differentiate without having modifications in place?

Barbara, Grade 5/6 Teacher: Yes and no. The problem-- I can differentiate in the terms of things like, you know, give him fewer tasks. I could give simpler questions. Like sometimes you use friendly numbers. There's all those things in Math that you can do. And even Writing, you know, go higher on the checklist... like having your work read back to you. Because, you know, we always say the ear catches things that the eye doesn't. All those kinds of things.

But when it comes down to actually handing over work and saying, ‘this is Grade 6, and you should be able to multiply by hundreds and thousands’ versus, ‘this is Grade 4, and you need to be able to multiply--’ No, I can't do that. I can't. I can't authentically write a report card and not get in trouble with OCT by saying this kid can do these expectations that are grade-level when he can't.

Now evident within the dilemmatic apparatus (i.e., the soup) are several more forces, including: the desire to reduce a student’s frustration level, the teacher’s comfort level with altering the curriculum without a Modified IEP, the policy vacuum that leads teachers to decide for themselves the degree of latitude permitted in altering the curriculum, the OCT’s ethical standard of *integrity*, *as well as* discourses of the “good teacher” which include pressures to meet the student within their ZPD and scaffold their learning through differentiated instruction. This is not a short list of ingredients in this dilemmatic soup, and there are still more to be added.

A Desire to Catch ‘em Before they Fall

The old teaching adage “catch ‘em before they fall” is a well-worn phrase that reflects the idea that teachers should intervene as early as possible so that support can be provided before

failure (i.e., a failing grade on a report card) and potential harm can occur. As the quotes below will illustrate, this “good teacher” discourse was experienced as a force pulling participants *towards* initiating a Modified IEP with a degree of urgency that adds a temporal element to the dilemmatic apparatus.

Pushing *against* initiating a Modified IEP are two Board policies: the covert, yet widely followed “two R” policy that restricts the initiation of curriculum modifications to only students who cannot otherwise access the curriculum as indicated by two consecutive R’s on the report card (see Chapter 5), and the Board’s *Individual Learning Plan* (ILP)—a new policy introduced at the time of the interviews and focus groups that requires that teachers try a list of accommodations and teaching strategies for 6-8 weeks *before* discussing the possibility of initiating an IEP during an *Internal School Team (IST)* meeting. Effectively, the ILP creates a 6-8 week waiting period for teachers requesting IEPs for their students. The intra-actions of these repelling forces add a temporal layer of complexity to participants’ dilemmatic apparatuses—the desire to hurry and get an IEP in place, and the simultaneous pressure to slow down the process.

Many educators in this study were reluctant to wait for the required 6-8 weeks as per the ILP, or the 6-8 months for the student to earn Rs on two consecutive report cards (depending on which policy text was guiding the process) as waiting conflicted with their desire to catch ‘em before they fall—what a “good teacher” should be doing. As one participant shared,

If there is a student that is really struggling and it's going to affect their self-esteem-- Most times, the board, um, they'd like to see the D's and R's before you move to those modifications. But in emergency type of situations... We've had a few situations where they're like, ‘nope, you don't need to wait that 6-8 weeks. Just move along and quickly get the kid’... because it's all about the child. (Sharon, SSEL)

While the modification and ILP policies are tools that force educators to slow down and be sure that no other strategy will work (e.g., accommodation, time to adjust, improved pedagogy), participants reported that it was difficult to abide by these “wait and see” approaches while witnessing the consequences of school failure in young students. This temporal tension is therefore added to the dilemmatic “soup.”

A Desire to Ensure Continuity of Program and Student Progress

Several teachers described wanting to initiate an IEP to help facilitate continuity during the transition from one school year to the next. Some expressed concern, and even sometimes fear, for what would happen to their student when they move to the next grade, the next teacher,

or the next school. These concerns were sometimes related to increasing demands of the curriculum, larger class sizes (especially when moving from the primary to the junior division), reduced resources in middle school, or simply the level of support particular colleagues would be willing or able to provide:

I tried to explain to the mom that the gap between SK to Grade 1 is a big jump, and every teacher has a different style. And even though there should still be play-based learning in first grade, some teachers-- like, the reality is some teachers don't do that. Right? ... It's a huge issue right now and it's a big concern for me 'cause I only have a little bit of time left with him. (Laila, Kindergarten Teacher)

After Grade 6... we'll be going off to middle school and not having the opportunity to have these same kind of intensive reading programs. (Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher)

If it's... somebody else next year, they'll have to go through that whole idea of learning about the child, learning about him, learning about triggers. (Kathryn, Grade 1/2 Teacher)

One teacher described how upsetting it was to see her former students regress when the receiving teacher did not provide the same level of support that she had. She feared this would happen with her current student despite the Modified IEP she had initiated.

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: In the school, he has lots of family, cousins. And they all kind of, you know, protect him, and take care of him. The kids know his needs, are aware, and really take care of him. But I worry for next year only because Grade 4, there's no [class size] cap. And I hate to say this, but [with] male teachers in Grade 4, I know he won't get the same care or attention as he does in Grade 3....

He's just gonna fall through the cracks more as he gets older. And that makes me sad, right? So, it's like, "Okay, I'll do what I can while I have him." But sometimes you work so hard to get them to a certain point and then you see him next year and you're like, "wow, that child has totally regressed," or you can see the skills you taught no longer present, or forgotten, and it's like, "uh, why do I work so hard?" Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Um, do you think modifications will be provided next year?

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: They better be! Oh, sorry. With the IEP they *should* be. Whether they will be, mmm, depends on which teacher he gets. Because I know there are teachers who have received some of my high IEP students and—no modifications. Even though it's a legal⁶⁹ document. Right?

Although its actual legal status in Ontario is questionable, many educators view the IEP as a legal document that must be implemented in the classroom. For some participants, this meant

⁶⁹ Technically, no. Though it is often perceived to be.

that the IEP could be a way of ensuring that future teachers would continue to provide the programming they set forth and believed was necessary for the student's continued success.

A Desire to Prevent Students from “Falling Through the Cracks”

Although many teacher participants described a fear of their student “falling through the cracks” of the system when they transitioned to different grades, divisions, or schools, there were additional complexities for educators working in low SES schools with high mobility rates—schools where many students were only enrolled for brief periods before moving to another community. In these contexts, the paradox of educational equity, and the temporal tensions of the IEP process (speeding it up versus slowing it down) became especially apparent.

For some participants in leadership roles (administrators and SSEs), the transient nature of their school meant that they needed to *slow down* and give students more time to adjust before initiating Modified IEPs. One administrator described insisting that students have time to adjust and have a formal psychoeducational assessment before Modified IEPs would be permitted:

We're a downtown school... 99% of our student population is below the poverty line, and we border on many different shelters. And so, we have a very transient population where we have students that come and go virtually every day.... So, we're trying to work with our teachers to understand they need to meet kids where they are. Especially for our school [where] we have a transient population, we can't make the assumption that a kid that's coming into our school is where everybody else is... We've been making a concerted effort to clean up our Modified [IEP] list. So, we're bringing those kids to [SST] team and getting them comprehensive assessments. (Victor, Administrator)

A SSE from another school with high mobility described a similar insistence of slowing teachers down when they were trying to initiate a Modified IEP:

So, the children that are coming to us from the refugee shelter, these are children that some of them have never even been to school. They were in refugee camps. And so, what happens is that I have a few of my colleagues that will come to me, and they'll be [like] ‘They're not reading. They're not able to infer. They're not able to get the author's message’ ... Um, and she wants to right away put them on an IEP. I mean, I understand, but we have to say to her, ‘Slow down. Give them some time.’ Like, right away, if they don't know how to write their name, they don't know how to read, they're reading at DRA Level A, and they're only in Grade 2 or Grade 3, we'll say to her, ‘but they've never been in school. They were in a refugee camp.’ (Sharon, SSE)

Interestingly, these accounts suggest that for them, the decision to initiate a Modified IEP is partly based on assumptions of who might benefit and who might be harmed by a Modified IEPs.

In this case, it is assumed that disabled students will benefit, but students who are struggling for other reasons may be harmed.

Conversely, some SSELs at other schools described how the transient nature of their school communities created a need to *speed up* the Individual Learning Plan (ILP),⁷⁰ In-School Support Team⁷¹ (IST), School Support Team⁷² (SST), and IEP processes. In these cases, the desire to speed up the process was premised on the assumption that the student would *benefit* from an IEP. The comments from one SSEL demonstrate how this assumption of benefit intra-acted with the school context, family context, IEP process, other special education processes, and parent advocacy within the dilemmatic apparatus, *pulling* them towards initiating a Modified IEP quickly so the student(s) would not “fall through the cracks”:

Andrea, SSEL: Unfortunately, the whole six to eight-week concept [of the ILP process] doesn't really exist. A lot of times it's “here's the ILP” because we wanna bring the child to an IST. “So please do the ILP,” but what ends up happening for our students is there's this rush. We don't know how long we'll have them. So, let's get everything documented as quickly as we can because as soon as they move on, we wanna make sure the referrals have started. Let's get the speech, the psyc, whatever we need. Let's get it in the system. Let's get some documentation down. So, it's in the [Ontario Student Record] OSR and it can go with the kid if they're leaving us after six weeks. Um, that kind of stuff.

So, there's always this sense of rush about things and it is for the benefit of the child because we don't know where they're going. And then we wanna make sure that some of these things can get into place as soon as they get set up somewhere else. So, there's this—there's always a sense of urgency to things, it feels like.

Moderator: Mm-hmm. So-so can you give some examples?... Like what specifically?

Andrea SSEL: So, we had a family that came... and the-the sense of urgency was about social work because one of the journals that was written by a student had some pretty

⁷⁰ Starting in 2023, teachers in the Board were asked to complete an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) for any student they wished to discuss at an IST or SST meeting. Documented in the ILP are the students' strengths, needs, strategies that have been attempted, and strategies that are working. The document also asks that teachers use DI, UDL, and CRRP strategies in the classroom for 6-8 weeks before the student can be discussed at an IST meeting.

⁷¹ In the Board, an ‘In-school Support Team’ (IST) is comprised of the SSEL and an administrator in the school. After following an ILP for 6-8 weeks, a teacher can meet with the IST to discuss the needs of a student. The IST may suggest strategies for the teacher to try and/or recommend that the case be discussed at an upcoming School Support Team meeting.

⁷² In the Board, School Support Teams (SST) are comprised of the SSEL, school administrator, Inclusive Education Consultant, Speech Language Pathologist, Psycho-Educational Consultant, and a Social Worker (and sometimes other professionals depending on the context). SST meetings occur once a month and the parents of the child being discussed are invited to attend with the classroom teacher. Upon hearing the case, the SST decides makes recommendations for the next steps (i.e., a classroom consult, a formal referral for a service, a formal assessment).

graphic images and it was very disturbing. Right? What the child had experienced at home. And so, there was a sense of urgency to make sure we get that social work referral in so that the social worker can start to connect with the family. So that was the first piece.

The second part of it was the mother kept saying, for some of the children, “they’re two years behind. They’re two years behind” and “they need an IEP.” And there’s this sense of “What? An IEP hasn’t been done?” and the old school didn’t do it. “So, I need you to do it because they’re two years behind.” And so, we’re calling the old school. Nope, there’s no IEP because everybody wants to deal with the trauma first before we start to put anything down in terms of an IEP, because there’s, you know, so much of that trauma that’s gonna impact their learning. So, there’s this sense of urgency. We need this IEP done because they could be leaving soon, and we want to document some of the challenges that they’re experiencing academically.

So, there’s this whole big discussion but then the discussion also revolves around, well, is the trauma impacting the academics? And is there more to it because they’ve been from school to school and now we just want to get some consistency and then let’s see where they’re at. So, a lot of times it comes down to let’s get the social work referral going. That’s a quick one. That’s one that the family wants, and the school wants to get going. And then if there’s a need for a referral for speech or psych. Those are the other two ones that there’s always a sense of rush about it.

While the administrator and SSEL in the first two cases were quite reluctant to put their transient students on IEPs, the SSEL in the second case was equally eager to rush the process. This demonstrates that the forces within dilemmatic apparatuses—configurations that include desires of the “good teacher,” monolithic IEP discourses of harm or benefit, material contexts, parental preferences, and temporal pressures—are reconfigured with every instance of the dilemma. The sections above suggest that a large number of ingredients go into producing dilemmatic soups. Yet it is important to remember that the taste of a soup is determined as much by what is put in it as what is left out.

Absent from the Space: A Desire to Prevent the Long-Term Impacts of Curriculum Modifications

A benefit of thinking with metaphoric spaces such as ecosystems or apparatuses is that there is room to conceptualize both what is present and what is absent. In this present study, a notable absence from participants’ dilemmatic apparatuses was a desire to protect students from the long-term consequences of curriculum modifications, particularly during the transition from elementary to secondary school. This was because most teacher participants, especially those in

younger grades, and/or schools in higher SES communities were not aware of any potential consequences of initiating a Modified IEP.

When teachers were asked about the impacts of a modified curriculum, almost all explained that it would reduce the student's current levels of frustration, stress, and shame, and improve their confidence, self-worth, and sense of belonging at school—all positive impacts. When asked if there might be any unintended *negative* consequences, very few teacher participants could think of any. One teacher suggested that the possibility of negative consequences might depend on how the modified program was delivered. She explained that while a student may experience more success with their own goals, if they see that these goals are different than other students, the goal of improving self-esteem may not be realized:

Yeah. Um, I think it comes down to how he perceives it, right? If he perceives it in a way that he feels he's 'less than', or if other kids start noticing, I think it can impact him. I think it's all in the approach. Right? Like how you approach it. I don't know how he'll perceive it. I can see it going e-either way. (Laila, Kindergarten Teacher)

When prompted to think about the potential for curriculum modifications increasing gaps in student learning, several teacher participants felt that those concerns were unfounded. Several were confident that a Modified IEP would be an effective short-term roadmap for closing gaps—a temporary tool that would be ended once the student had caught up (Chapter 8). However, when these teachers were pressed to think of cases where it had worked, none could think of any.

Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher: Modifying your program's great for... making progress. Like, I think with maybe next year, you know, [if] she doesn't like need modified program at the end of next year, because she will have, you know, used all her really, um, you know, her really good learning skills and her really good-- kind of, uh, you know, all those good things she brings to school, and to kind of help herself catch up.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. mm-hmm. Okay. And have you... have you ever come across a kid who had a Modified IEP and you were like, no, I think these modifications are done and they're caught up?

Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher: Um, have I ever come across a kid with an IEP--[trails off thinking]? Um, no.

Despite the lack of evidence of the curriculum modifications working as they conceive it, several participants remained committed to the idea that the policy would close gaps rather than increase

them. This is not surprising given that there is often a difference between how we *think* policies work compared to how they *actually* work—a difference long-recognized in critical policy scholarship (Ball et al., 2012; A. E. Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Young & Diem, 2018).

Only one teacher participant acknowledged the potential for increasing gaps due to reduced exposure to grade-level content, but felt that it was unfounded since, for her, in the context of the Writing curriculum in Grade 2, modifications were used for the purpose of being able to evaluate the student according to lower standards (i.e., protect the student from the harm of low grades). In her context, she believed the student would therefore receive the same exposure to teaching and learning as the other students.

Kathryn, Grade 1/2 Teacher: Well [sigh], I mean... I know sometimes parents think if I go with this modified curriculum, it means that... I'm downgrading the curriculum. Or [they] feel like they're not getting enough. It's sometimes sort of, like [pause] this image is projected when really, it's not. It's-- I'm just-- I'm assessing-- They're doing the same work in Grade 2, it's just that I'm gonna be evaluating them a little bit, you know, lower in terms of-- but the work is the same. It's just that, you know, I'm evaluating a little bit at a different grade level.

Interviewer: So... [it just] gives you license to give him a B on his work?

Kathryn, Grade 1/2 Teacher: Right and then yes... And and in in that sense, that's going to uplift him. And it's also, it's also a B that you expect a Grade 1 to do. And it's at grade level. And so, it's going to, you know, at least give him a good sense of self-worth and self-image, because as curriculum builds, you know, there's more expectations, and if the child gets left behind, they get frustrated.

In the context of the 2006 Writing curriculum—a curriculum that did not distinguish what should be taught in each grade (Chapter 5), a modification may not really restrict access to curriculum because the expectations are nearly identical from grade to grade (Chapter 5). However, in the context of a curriculum that outlines specific grade-by-grade expectations that follow a linear progression (e.g., Math, some strands of the 2023 Language curriculum), the impacts of curriculum modifications will be very different. Speaking in this context, a SSEL from a large middle school articulated the concern of increasing gaps in foundational knowledge and skills.

Well, I mean it's like we said earlier, it's the potential-- for us especially with the [Grade] 8s and then they leave us to 9-- there's--there's just potential for gaps. Like, there's potential for significant gaps in grade-based knowledge that's required to build on to go to the next grade. (Lucas, SSEL)

Interestingly, one of the studies identified in the scoping literature review (Chapter 3) discussed this consequence in India where several states were beginning to modify the standard curriculum expectations to support students with learning disabilities in secondary schools without considering what the consequences might be at the post-secondary level:

While the current educational policy aims to help students with learning disabilities participate in the general education curriculum and pass the 10th standard secondary exam, the implementation of curricular modifications has repercussions in post-secondary settings when students lack the math content knowledge for a required math course in their Bachelor's degree program. (Eichhorn, 2016, p. 75)

Key lessons emerge from the examples provided above. First, there is a need to differentiate between contexts such as grade levels, subject areas, and design of the curriculum (i.e., open versus sequential) when considering the consequences of curriculum modifications; the policy and its enactments and their effects cannot be thought of as homogeneous. Second, it is important to consider the relationships between modifications in one context and another, for instance how modifications in the primary division may impact access to curriculum in the secondary division. A longer-term view was often absent from teacher participants' dilemmatic apparatuses, which were configured around their immediate concerns. Forces of the present therefore overshadowed concerns for the future, producing short-term actions with long-term ghosts.

Initiating a Modified IEP often places educators in complicated ethical terrain. The dilemmas are real, and the stakes are high—yet there are no easy answers. As one teacher put it, “I don't know. I don't know. Again, it's so hard to say. I feel like I've been teaching forever but at the same time I still don't have any answers” (Sophia, Grade 3 Teacher). This uncertainty speaks to the emotional and professional weight educators carry as they try to do right by their students in complex and often contradictory systems. Unfortunately, as illustrated in the section below, these complexities are often overlooked and differences in opinions of whether or not to initiate an IEP are often reduced to “good teacher” and “bad teacher” narratives—a reduction with material consequences.

Revisiting the Working Definition of “Inappropriate” Modified IEPs

In Chapter 4, I offered a tentative working definition for the “inappropriate” initiation of curriculum modifications—initiations of Modified IEPs for students achieving D's or C's on their report cards. However, in light of the forces outlined above, I am beginning to question this definition. What appeared to be “inappropriate” decisions to modify now reads as a situated

response to a constellation of ethical, emotional, and structural pressures. Perhaps many “inappropriate” Modified IEPs are initiated as acts of care, protection, or professional integrity enacted within a constrained system. Ultimately, determining what constitutes an “appropriate” use of curriculum modifications will depend on a thorough understanding of the many functions and policy vacuums that this practice is currently fulfilling.

7.2 – Deconstructing and Diffracting “Bad Teacher” Discourses

Portraying teachers as the problem is the problem. (Salton et al., 2022, p. 61)

As already demonstrated in Chapters 5 and 6, as well as in the sections above, there are several intra-acting forces contributing to the variability in determining report card grades, grade-level performance, and ultimately the perceived need to “flag” a student, “bring them to team,” or initiate a Modified IEP. Yet these discrepancies in judgement were often reduced to discourses of “the bad teacher”—narratives that individualize systemic dilemmas and locate fault in the judgments of particular educators. In this section, I diffract these “bad teacher” discourses through the lived dilemmas of participants to show a more complex picture. Drawing on agonistic rather than antagonistic understandings, I deconstruct these deficit framings and reconceptualize them as dilemmatic apparatuses, showing how judging other people’s judgements can oversimplify and moralize the complex negotiations between policy, pedagogy, and professional responsibilities.

Three Main Axes of “Good Teacher” and “Bad Teacher” Discourses

Many of the “bad teacher” discourses that emerged in this study appear to be shaped by three larger axes of assumptions: the axis of effort (e.g., good teachers work hard; bad teachers do not), the axis of pedagogy (e.g., good teachers use good pedagogy; bad teachers do not), and the ever-present force of monolithic IEP discourses (e.g., IEPs are harmful; IEPs are protective). Assumptions along these axes of “good” and “bad” intra-act with additional forces (e.g. ILPs, the tiered approach, special education processes, inclusive education ideologies) to produce narrow and sometimes contradictory discourses of teacher goodness. Overviews of the three axes are provided below, and then specific “bad teacher” discourses are discussed through a more agonistic lens.

1. The Axis of IEP Harm or Protection

The *Apparatus of Monolithic Discourses of IEP Harm or Protection* has already emerged several times in this dissertation. The assumptions produced through this apparatus appear again here and entangle with the additional forces listed below to produce discourses and judgements of “the good teacher” and “the bad teacher.”

2. The Axis of Effort: Good Teachers Work Hard. Bad Teachers Do Not

Teaching is a very demanding profession that requires a considerable amount of work. Consequently, narratives of “good teachers” and “bad teachers” are deeply entangled with perceptions of work effort. Ironically, these narratives are often applied paradoxically. As demonstrated below, discourses of work avoidance were invoked to criticize both teachers who initiated IEPs and those who did not, indicating that judgments about professional effort can cut both ways depending on the assumption of IEP harm or benefit.

3. The Axis of Pedagogy: Good Teachers use Good Pedagogy. Bad Teachers do not.

The final axis relates to discourses of professional competencies—a very common form of “good teacher” discourse (Moore, 2004). However, the specific contours of the professional competency discourse shifts with pedagogical trends, and at this moment, the Board is very much focused on DI, UDL, CRRP, and the tiered approach to support their agenda of inclusive education (Toronto District School Board, 2025b).

The Board follows the MoE directive of using a “tiered approach to prevention and ” (Toronto District School Board, 2025b, p. 22). The *tiered approach* is a framework for providing increasing levels of support based on student needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 24). Based on the three-tier *Response to Intervention* (RTI) framework (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003), *Tier 1* strategies are used for all students, *Tier 2* strategies for some students who need additional supports, and *Tier 3* strategies are reserved for “students who require intensive support to achieve their learning goals” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 24). One of the objectives of the tiered approach is to “ensure appropriate and timely intervention to address these students’ needs and significantly *reduce the likelihood that they will develop more intractable problems in the future*” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 24, *emphasis added*). In other words, effective Tier 1 pedagogy, should, in theory, reduce the need for IEPs which are ostensibly initiated for students needing Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports.

According to the Board’s *Special Education Plan* (2025b), Tier 1 pedagogy should include evidenced-based practices, be grounded in *Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP)*, and should be delivered through Differentiated Instruction (DI), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). CRRP is an approach that emphasizes teaching in a way that affirms students’ cultural identities, connects learning to their cultural backgrounds, and challenges system inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). DI, as explained above, is a framework used to emphasize that different students should be taught and evaluated in different ways depending on their readiness, interests and learning profiles (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Similarly, UDL is a framework for designing teaching strategies, assignments and learning environments that will be accessible to a wide variety of students. This framework emphasizes planning for accessibility from the start rather than developing lessons and assignments that will need retroactive adjustments to accommodate certain students (Capp, 2017). All three approaches promote flexibility in one’s teaching practice based on student needs, interests, and identities, and are enthusiastically performed by “the good teacher.”

If “good pedagogy” reduces the need for IEPs, then conversely, it may be assumed that “bad pedagogy” increases the need for IEPs. Several participants drew a connection between instructional shortcomings, student disengagement, under-performance and the need for IEPs—issues that DI, UDL, and CRRP are said to address (Tomlinson et al., 2003). One SSEL shared her frustration that some of her colleagues needed to “up their game”:

Sometimes if boys don't behave in the current sense of, you know, they don't sit still, they don't attend for long periods of time, they don't-- [trails off]. And it's like ‘Nah nah nah [wagging finger]. You need to up your game! You need to get up there and *do some razzle dazzle*, and have different kinds of seating, and make it okay that they sit on the floor, and that they talk to their friends, and you know, give them the computer, and let them do different things. Maybe they're not gonna write for you every time. Maybe they wanna do it orally. Maybe they wanna do a presentation.’ I don't know. (Jennifer, SSEL)

The Board has implemented several measures to ensure that these key pedagogical approaches are addressed in classrooms before an IEP can be initiated. For example, the ILP process requires that teachers list all of the UDL, DI, and CRRP strategies they have used for at least 6-8 weeks before they can attend an IST or SST meeting to discuss the student’s needs.⁷³ The commitment to reducing the need for IEPs through improved pedagogy is also reflected in the Board’s *K-1*

⁷³ Interchangeably referred to as “team meetings.”

IEP Strategy and the *2-12 IEP Review* policies introduced in 2022, where, as described in Chapter 4, IEPs that only outlined strategies that could theoretically be achieved through UDL, DI, and CRRP, were reviewed and restricted.⁷⁴ Many participants, especially those in leadership roles, supported the new ILP, *K-1 IEP strategy*, and *2-12 IEP Review* policies as ways to ensure pedagogical improvement and reduce unnecessary IEPs:

The accommodated IEPs, we're pushing back on, with, you know, just with pedagogy. Especially 21st century pedagogy. And, you know, do you really need an accommodation if you can incorporate those things in the way you teach? (Victor, Administrator)

I think when teachers get comfortable with... the UDL pieces and the DI pieces... if they realistically put the effort into trying them, I think they'll see that they're gonna be successful and they'll start to see more kids being able to be successful at grade-level... I know our admin does a good job of flagging kids... and if the kid's being brought to "Team" for something cause they're not achieving at grade level, our admin is pretty good at asking those teachers like, "Okay, but what-- so what are you doing? You know like, what have you been doing in class to see what else might work, right?" And I think we're gonna need more of that. (Lucas, SSEL)

While it is important to acknowledge poor pedagogy as *part* of the problem, there are many additional forces in the apparatuses that lead teachers to initiate an IEP and reducing the situation to poor pedagogy alone masks the other forces that contribute to the situation.

Towards More Agonistic Understanding of Teacher Judgement

In the sections below, I diffract three discourses of “the bad teacher” that emerged in this study with the stories from teacher participants to create a more agonistic view of their dilemmatic apparatuses.

“Bad Teachers” Avoid the Work of ILPs, IST/SSTs, or IEPs

Several teacher participants expressed shock or dismay that a student had not already been “flagged,” “brought to team,” or put on a Modified IEP. Their colleagues’ lack of action was often attributed to low work effort, rather than any of the forces outlined so far in this dissertation, including possibly diverging perceptions of the benefit or harm of IEPs (Chapter 4), differing interpretations of the when-to-modify *de facto* policies (Chapter 5), inconsistent grading practices and grade-level determinations (Chapter 6), and the variable forces in teachers’

⁷⁴ Although this indicates the faulty logic that DI and UDL are strategies in and of themselves, which they are not. They are ways of delivering a variety of evidence-based strategies to different students—strategies that include curriculum modifications and accommodations (see Section 7.1 above).

dilemmatic apparatuses (Chapter 7). Instead, the lack of referral was attributed to “bad teachers” inflating grades to avoid the work of special education referrals. Several comments reflected this discourse:

If anything, students are not brought to team simply because of the paperwork it requires to get them there. So, there may be a student that's sort of cruised on C's, but really are D's or R's. And then they get to a teacher who knows the process, who understands. Um, and only then are they brought to team. (Selena, Grade 5 Teacher)

I feel like sometimes teachers' grade... when they should be giving an R and they're like they don't want to, you know? They don't want to upset a parent. Or they don't want to have to start an IEP. So, we have some teachers that are like that. They'll kind of avoid it and give like a D. You know what I mean? Like, their grading will be off. And... when a kid comes to IPRC, you know, down the road... and the kid's really struggling, and the teacher gave like a C or a D, we don't have enough data to show [that they need special education supports]. It's really hard to prove that the student is really struggling because the report card doesn't match up to the student profile. (Laura, SSEL)

To be clear, my argument here is not to dismiss these claims but rather to hold them in agonistic tension with the additional explanations for why some educators do not initiate IEPs. Many of these forces were presented in previous sections and chapters of this dissertation, and several more are presented below.

First, contrary to popular belief, the IEP itself is not a support—it is a document that lists the supports a student is receiving. If there are no supports to list, there is nothing to document in the IEP other than the strategies the teacher is currently using. This often comes as a surprise to teachers and families who believe that initiating an IEP will increase the level of support in the classroom. As one SSEL explains,

Well, it's just a piece of paper... I'm even saying to parents like, well, we're telling you that all of these things are being done. What is the piece of paper gonna do?... Like I've got all these like, “attention and focus” alternative pages and “anxiety” alternative pages and “transition” alternative pages. I don't see anyone doing anything for any of those things.... So, I'm always like-- I say to a teacher before creating an alternative program, ‘are you going to deliver the alternative program?’ ... And so, I find that it's just a piece of paper. (Alana, SSEL)

Some participants explained their reluctance to initiate an IEP was because it offered little or no value, since it only served as documentation of what they were already doing to support the student. Relatedly, some participants reported that referring a student for an IST/SST meeting also yielded little benefit as requests for additional school-based supports often went

unanswered. Instead, they are provided with suggestions for how to improve their pedagogy. As one teacher participant shared,

I have been told to use additional strategies, and then if necessary, bring them back to SST. This is exactly why teachers don't go to 'Team,' by the way. I hear all the time from people, "Why would I do that? It's just gonna be more work for me and no support for the student." So. [shrugs]. (Barbara, Grade 5/6 Teacher)

Several participants described implementing UDL, DI, and CRRP with high fidelity and yet their students still needed additional classroom supports. When advocating on their behalf, at IST or SST meetings, they were often met with suggestions for strategies that they were already using or that they simply could not provide in their classroom context. The teacher quoted above described her experiences advocating for a student with ADHD to receive additional support through social work to address a recent trauma, and resource support to help close gaps in Math. She felt that she was not able to adequately provide effective support within her classroom alone:

I feel that what would really help him is some one-to-one withdrawal, not constant, but, you know, maybe three times a week just to help him get caught up, and to also get his sense of, 'I can do this' going. Because right now the additional support that I can offer him is just for a very few minutes. And it's also with other students. So, he's, I think, comparing himself. Well, I know he's comparing himself, and this is a gifted class so there's some really high achievers. So, um, that would be a one big one. Um, and social work support, which technically he has, but it ends up being like 10 minutes every second week. And if it's during a period where he doesn't want to leave like science, which he enjoys, um, then he just doesn't go...

We have like the spec ed [consultant] at our meetings, and it's very much like, 'Well, do you have a quiet workspace?' And it's like, 'I'm in a small room with 26 kids. What do you think?' Like, the quiet workspace is not what's gonna solve this problem. You know? So, my feeling is that there are very limited resources and so they are in fact gatekeeping because they've got-- [pause] they've got nothing.... Like, I don't think they come to work in the morning and think, 'Hey, I'm gonna deny kids today.' But-- [shrugs]... I feel like I'm always up against a wall trying to get something that's not there... In fact, the principal went so far as to say to the parent: 'you're dreaming if you think he's getting extra support.' (Barbara, Grade 5/6 Teacher)

Two other teachers described their frustration with consultants coming to their classrooms to coach them to improve their practice, but who were also unsuccessful in their challenging contexts:

One year I had the psychologist come into my classroom to show me how it's done. And even she struggled. And it was like, yeah. (Selena, Grade 3 Teacher)

[A behavioral consultant] tried to- she tried to do a lesson with the class to model to me how to do things. I'm not kidding you, [Interviewer]. Her lesson lasted two minutes before— sweetest lady, nicest lady-- And she was like, 'Yeah, no. I'm not doing this.' She was supposed to come in for five weeks. She didn't come back. (Laila, Kindergarten Teacher)

Access to support will be discussed in detail in Chapters 8, 9 and 10. For now, it is sufficient to note that while improved use of UDL, DI, and CRRP can solve many challenges, they cannot resolve all challenges.

“Bad Teachers” Initiate IEPs to Avoid Being Held Accountable to Students’ Lack of Progress

As demonstrated above, there is an assumption that most instances of student under-performance and the resulting IEPs are not needed if DI, UDL, and CRRP are used effectively. In practice, this can look like administrators pushing back on undesired grades to force teachers to improve their pedagogy. For example, one SSEL shared how the superintendent for her school announced that they would not be allowed to assign R's or I's on the report card.⁷⁵ This policy posed a dilemma for two teachers in her school who had students engaging in work refusals for most of the school year:

It was a refusal. It was a refusal! The work went on the table: 'Here we go, lessons done. Let's get some stuff done,' and *nnnnnothing* happened. Or something would happen today, and NOTHING would happen for 2 more weeks. Or that sort of thing.... But [the superintendent] will not allow I's on the report 'cause we're clearly, in her words, we're 'clearly not working hard enough' if there isn't enough information. (Jennifer, SSEL)

Some participants reported that this kind of administrative pressure led some colleagues to use Modified IEPs (new or existing) to give students B's on report cards in order to avoid drawing attention to the student's under-performance and face pressure from administrators to improve their pedagogy. This discourse is an example of how the assumptions about pedagogy intra-act with assumptions of work effort and the grading policies for Modified IEPs to produce a discourse that IEPs are initiated to avoid doing the work of inclusive pedagogy. Several comments from participants reflected this discourse:

⁷⁵ This directive from the superintendent may also have been entangled the legacies of grade retention and social promotion policies. Given that there is no clear policy for what to do with failing students, perhaps it is easiest to forbid teachers from issuing failing grades in the first place.

It's a way to just give this kid a grade, right? Where nobody's gonna bother you, right? Because it's, you know, whatever. They have their 70 on their IEP, it's checked on their report card, and away you go... 'Here's the 70 so I'm not in trouble' type of thing. (Lucas, SSEL)

I want to say very quickly, I do not think any of my colleagues write IEPs to throw them in a drawer and forget about them. I don't think that of the people that I work with. I've worked with people like that [before, but] I don't have any right now. (Jennifer, SSEL)

The concern around this approach is that students may be inappropriately referred for a Modified IEP or remain stuck on a Modified IEP when challenges could be addressed through improved pedagogy. Whether it was true or not, the comments from one SSEL illustrate how one teacher's requests to initiate a Modified IEP was interpreted in this way:

We just had two children brought [to IST] that we know are not reading. But we both, my principal and I, both said to her, 'You know? No. We'll mark it down. We'll do it on the ILP. And we'll revisit it next year. But you will have 30 days to write an IEP, that will take you into May, for like, one month [left of the school year].' Like, come on! Like, just so you can put it on the report card?!? Checkmark the IEP with the rider statement?!? We're like, 'Yeah, no. No!' (Sharon, SSEL)

In this case, the SSEL described a teacher requesting Modified IEPs in Reading for two students in April—less than two months before final report cards were to be written. The teacher's motivation was interpreted as not wanting to put an undesired grade on the report card and face pedagogical accountability regarding the students' failure to progress. While this motivation may be true, additional forces, as illustrated in Section 7.1, might also have been intra-acting in the teacher's dilemmatic apparatus, including a desire to protect the students from the consequences of receiving failing grades, to facilitate the students' transition to the next teacher, or simply that the process of assessing, intervening, giving the student time, and re-assessing, can span several months and they were now confident that the students met criteria for curriculum modifications. While there may be some degree of work avoidance involved, reducing the teacher's motivation to this factor alone hides other contributing forces that may need attention and consideration.

“Bad Teachers” Initiate IEPs to Shirk Responsibility or Exclude Students

In some situations, IEPs are initiated to access resources outside of the classroom including, instruction from the resource teacher, specialized equipment such as interactive white boards, additional personnel such as a Special Needs Assistant (SNA), or, in some cases, placements in self-contained special education classes. Inclusion Consultants are often the first

gatekeepers⁷⁶ in these processes, and therefore the request for an IEP can generate a degree of suspicion. When the focus group of Inclusion Consultants was asked what typically triggers the IEP or SST process, one candidly responded:

It's the kids where-- I'm gonna say it straight-- that the teachers want out of the classroom. They don't fit the profile of the, you know, the-the child in the classroom, and they want the kid out. (Nancy, Inclusion Consultant)

Administrators also may be viewed with this same suspicion. Another Inclusion Consultant explained that the initiation of a Modified IEP can sometimes be the first step towards the ultimate goal of having the student transfer from their school to a school with a self-contained class:

Some of our seasoned administrators are pushing for-- Um, are using the push-out model. So an IEP, IST, SST, IPRC is where they're headed. (Danielle, Inclusion Consultant)

Although the exclusionary history of public schooling and ongoing prevalence of ableism in education systems have undoubtedly shape many of these dynamics, they must be held in tension with additional motivations for advocating for additional instructional support outside the mainstream classroom—perhaps most paradoxically, a genuine feeling that the student is being underserved within their own classroom.

As several of the teacher participants in this study helped me to understand, the pursuit of a Modified IEP, resource support, or even a placement in a self-contained class was often in response to the structural conditions that have made the ideology of inclusive education nearly impossible for teachers to realize in their classrooms (Chapter 9). Here, assumptions on the axis of good pedagogy and the axis of work effort, intra-act with ideologies of inclusive education to produce a discourse that “good teachers” create inclusive environments where all students succeed. The consequence of this discourse is that if a student continues to struggle, the cause may be attributed to “bad teaching,” and with a similar logic, teachers’ advocacy for additional resources or instructional support outside of the mainstream classroom may be interpreted as shirking their professional responsibility to be inclusive of the student.

Yet, every single participant in this study commented on the difficulty of working in a system with extremely limited supports for students. A Grade 2 teacher participant shared how she was desperately seeking additional staffing support for an Autistic student in her class. She

⁷⁶ People determining eligibility.

strongly believed in the inclusion model, but despite best practices with DI and UDL (as validated by the Board's consulting Autism Team), she was struggling to meet his social, behavioural, and academic needs while alone in the room. Like the teachers quoted in the sections above, she too was frustrated with the lack of options available to her student through the IST/SST process.

And I have 18,000 pairs of headphones they gave me. 'Cause that's how you support a student with needs [sarcastically]. You give him some headphones. So, I got a bunch of headphones [sigh]. (Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher)

The teacher later shared that the family had decided to move the student to a self-contained special education program in the following year in order to access the additional staffing support that was not available to him in the integrated setting. This was upsetting to the teacher who believed that he could have been successful in the mainstream classroom had the appropriate staffing supports been available (Chapter 9).

Similarly, several participants indicated that with adequate supports, they believed that their students could achieve grade-level expectations and not need Modified IEPs. In these cases, the decision to initiate a Modified IEP, or the particular goals set in the Modified IEP were not necessarily a reflection of the student's potential but rather what could realistically be achieved in the classroom context given the class size and the sheer number of students needing support. The following excerpt from a focus group session with SSELs is particularly illustrative of this unfortunate reality:

Grace, SSEL: Whether you go by SMART⁷⁷ goals or not... certainly they should be achievable. I think we can all agree that whatever the goals are on their [IEP], we want them [to be] achievable.

Jane, SSEL: Yeah.

⁷⁷ *SMART goals* are an acronym for goals that are specific, measurable, attainable/achievable, routine-based, and tied to a priority (Jung, 2007). The Board encourages the use of SMART goals in Modified IEPs when describing the modified curriculum expectations the student is working towards. This participant is therefore discussing setting goals that are realistic and achievable given the teacher's ability to help the student achieve them within the classroom context, rather than based on the student's capacity.

Grace, SSEL: We might have to tweak them, but I think that part of the thinking that goes into that, whether it's conscious or not, is, is it achievable given the amount of support that that student can get in the classroom?

Jane, SSEL: Yeah.

Grace, SSEL: Using the inclusion⁷⁸ model, and with the amount of available resource support, is it achievable?

Jane, SSEL: Yeah.

Grace, SSEL: Not-- - is it-is it achievable for this kid to do this?

Jane, SSEL: Mm-hmm.

Grace, SSEL: And you can't-you can't easily separate those. They're inextricably linked, but I think we are under serving our kids.

Jane, SSEL: Yeah

Grace, SSEL: We're under delivering... And that's a harsh criticism. I know.

Jane, SSEL: But, um, I've been feeling that for a while, to be honest with you. I've been feeling that for a while. I've been struggling. I've been struggling, um, personally. And, um, I-I just-- I understand why they took away the [half-time special education classes] model.⁷⁹ I understand why. But to then not have anything? To go straight to inclusion [read integration] and reduce the allocation?

Just as teachers advocating for additional instructional supports may not be trying to exclude the student from their classroom, this excerpt demonstrates that teachers wanting to initiate a Modified IEP may not be shirking their responsibility to teach the student. Rather, this exchange highlights how the initiation of a Modified IEP may be less of a reflection of a teacher's perception of a student's inability to learn grade-level content, and more a reflection of the teacher's inability to help the student achieve grade-level expectations within the constraints of the classroom.

Taken together, the accounts in this section reveal how diffracting "bad teacher" discourses through the lived dilemmas of participants results in more agonistic understandings of

⁷⁸ The term "inclusion" is often conflated with *integration*—the placement of students with special education needs in mainstream classrooms without the corresponding resources to support their physical, social, emotional, or academic needs. As explained in Chapter 9, the Board frequently espouses an ideology of inclusion but has not always been able to achieve it in practice.

⁷⁹ The necessary elimination of the half-time special education class model will be discussed in Chapter 9.

the dilemmas teachers face offer new insights into where the possibilities for change are located, pointing toward more informed sites for action within the system.

Concluding Thoughts

In the end, ineffective pedagogy and work avoidance are important factors to acknowledge as they relate to the initiation of IEPs; however, framing this complex issue as solely a matter of individual teacher failure is a dangerous oversimplification that masks three additional avenues that require attention and action. First, many “good teacher” practices lead to curriculum modifications, including protecting students from the harm of grades, differentiating content in order to “meet them where they’re at,” a desire to “catch them before they fall,” and to facilitate continuity of programming during transitions—forces that raise the question: what is the “appropriate” use of a Modified IEP? Acknowledging these more complicated dynamics opens the door to a new understanding—one in which the over-initiation of IEPs may not only be driven by “bad teachers,” but also “good teachers” and the voids in the ecosystem they are attempting to fill. Second, despite the emphasis on teachers’ pedagogical competence, very few participants questioned the evaluation tools that resulted in differing opinions regarding the need for a Modified IEP. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, there may be factors within the evaluation process that make students appear to be performing lower than provincial standards when they actually are not. The emphasis on the performativity of “the good teacher” (e.g., the enactment of DI, UDL, CRRP, inclusive design) might overshadow an under-examined aspect of good teaching—evaluation practices. Finally, an overfocus on poor pedagogy and teacher work avoidance can distract from the deeper, systemic culprits that have made the ideology of inclusive education nearly impossible for many teachers to realize: a lack of adequate resources, support, and structural capacity to meet the diverse needs of students. In other words, emphasis on “bad teacher” discourses can obscure the structural conditions. This topic will be taken up more thoroughly in Chapter 9, but first I explore another important apparatus in the ecosystem: the intra-actions of accommodations, modifications, and the missing component of intervention.

Chapter 8: Results and Discussion

Accommodations, Modifications, and the Missing Piece

The question is how might we move from what needs to be opposed to what can be imagined out of what is already happening, embedded in an immanence of doing.
(Lather, 2016, p. 129)

There is no doubt that there is a strong relationship between accommodations and modifications. When accommodations are in place, they allow students to demonstrate their understanding and reach higher standards than might otherwise be possible. Accommodations are essential and a fundamental right for disabled people in an inclusive society, yet their provision in school settings is more complicated than one might assume. Across many interviews and focus groups participants reported an inconsistent or inadequate provision of accommodations, particularly in literacy instruction, that ultimately contributed to the decision to initiate a Modified IEP for students. On the surface, this refusal could be interpreted as an ableist rejection of inclusive teaching. Yet, upon deeper examination, it reflects a deeper pedagogical dilemma: navigating when students should be accommodated for a particular skill deficit, and when they should be explicitly taught. Also entangled here is what Lea (2024) calls a *policy hauntology*—the material and immaterial legacies of harmful intervention practices aimed at “fixing” disability, and hegemonic ideology of the medical model of disability that continues to shape special education.

In this chapter, I examine the entanglement of accommodations, modifications, and a missing piece: “intervention.”⁸⁰ In Section 9.1, I provide a conceptual clarification of

⁸⁰ A brief note on the word “intervention:” From a Critical Disability Theory (CRT) perspective, the language of intervention is weighted with historical and emotional harm (Davis, 2017; Russell, 1998; Withers, 2024). Many disabled and neurodivergent adults have shared that their past experiences with intervention and remediation through therapies, surgeries, and educational programs were painful and unnecessary (L. L. Allen et al., 2024; Withers, 2024). Many report that these interventions were imposed without consent with an agenda of normalizing or erasing aspects of their identity (Kupferstein, 2019; Wong, 2020). These reflections reveal the harm that seemingly beneficial practices can cause and must be kept at the forefront of any conversation of how, when, and why learning supports should be provided in schools.

Intervention is an important recurring topic throughout the remainder of this dissertation, and I argue strongly in favour of it. However, as I will articulate later in this chapter, we must reenvision intervention models so that they are grounded Disability Studies in Education (DSE) theory, and the principles of consent, dignity, dialogue, and justice. While the word “intervention” is frequently used by participants, I will use scare quotes to indicate that this is a loaded term that will be revisited at the end of this chapter.

accommodations and demonstrate how the static line that is often drawn between accommodations and modifications is misleading. I also outline the tension between accommodations and intervention and argue that in many contexts, accommodations on their own are insufficient. In Section 9.2, I provide a conceptual clarification of modifications by outlining three common ways they are understood and used in the Board—one in line with their original purpose (a tool for inclusion), and two that misappropriate modifications for other purposes (as a de facto grade-retention within an ongoing system of social promotion, and as an ineffective way to map intervention plans). In Section 9.3, I argue that supplementary instructional support (a reimagined “intervention” or “remediation”) is essential in schools. Yet, given the painful histories of remediation (a policy hauntology), it is imperative that we reenvision intervention models so that they are grounded in Disability Studies in Education (DSE) theory, and guided by the principles of consent, dignity, dialogue, and justice. Finally, in Section 9.4, building on the previous sections, I present a reimagining of special education in which the medical model is no longer the defining framework, and supplementary instructional supports are provided *outside* special education, allowing the field to focus on access, inclusion, equity, and justice, not fixing disability.

8.1 – Conceptual Clarification: What are Accommodations?

There is considerable confusion regarding the distinction between accommodations and modifications in research, policy, and practice (K. Barron, 2024). This confusion stems in part from inconsistent terminology across educational jurisdictions and a frequent conflation of the two terms (Chapter 3), but also from oversimplified definitions that overlook the contextual dynamics of the practices. While accommodations are typically framed as supports that enable access to curriculum without altering the expectations, and modifications as changes to curriculum expectations themselves (Fisher & Frey, 2001; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004a), these distinctions are far more fluid in classroom settings than the definition suggest. As one SSEL described, “I think teachers still have a hard time understanding the difference. Like they can articulate the difference, but it's harder to put it into practice” (Alana, SSEL). This section explores four key dimensions of accommodations and their entanglement with modification and intervention, highlighting how these intra-actions contribute to their often-misunderstood complexity.

Accommodations and Modifications are Contextual

All ten teacher participants in this study reported that they provided accommodations for their students. However, as the interviews progressed it became clear that while they were more than willing to provide accommodations in some contexts or subject areas, they were reluctant to do so in others. For example, a Grade 6 teacher explained:

[I try] to find different ways of having her show her learning. Like, I don't want her to feel stressed about the reading and the writing...I'm happy to sit with her and write down a couple of things and scribe a couple of things for her just because I don't want that to be the thing that keeps her from getting her best work out. In things like Art and Science and Social Studies, and things like-- where I'm not specifically looking at the complexity of sentences and how she writes things down and stuff like that. (Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher)

The reluctance to provide the reading and writing accommodations during the actual Reading and Writing programs was because doing so contradicted participants' unwavering belief that their students could learn those skills, even if on a different timeline than their peers. They did not want to restrict the student's opportunity to practice decoding, which would be lost if accommodated. This difficult tension has been largely overlooked in practice-based discussions about accommodations (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, p. 48), perhaps because denying students their entitled supports would be a gross violation of their rights—an act of the "bad teacher." This tension underscores a central issue that is rarely acknowledged in policy and practice: that accommodations and modifications are highly contextual. In other words, what constitutes an accommodation in one context, may actually be a modification in another.

The Texas Education Agency provides one of the only resources that recognizes the contextual nature of accommodations and modifications. In their IEP development guide, they provide four examples of how certain tools can be either accommodations or modifications depending on the context (Figure 8.1). One example provided is of the calculator. If the objective is to measure a student's ability to solve multi-step word problems, the use of a calculator would be an accommodation. If the objective is to measure the student's ability to multiply 2- or 3-digit numbers, the use of a calculator would modify the curriculum as it changes what is expected of the student.

Figure 8.1*The Contextual Dynamics of Accommodations and Modifications*

Area	Accommodation	Modification
Spell check software	If the objective of the assignment is to write a three-paragraph essay to describe the water cycle, the use of spell-checking software to support composition and editing is likely an accommodation.	If the objective of the assignment is to demonstrate mastery of specific spelling rules, the allowance of spell check software is likely a modification.
Text to speech	If the objective of the assignment is to access grade-level science content, text to speech technology to support accessibility when the student is reading below grade-level is likely an accommodation.	If the objective of the assignment is to demonstrate reading comprehension at grade level, the use of text to speech is likely a modification.
Calculator	If the objective of the assignment is solving multi-step word problems, the use of a calculation device to support math calculation is likely an accommodation.	If the objective of the assignment is to demonstrate 3- digit x 2-digit multiplication with regrouping, the use of a calculation device to support math calculation is likely a modification.
Time	If the objective of the assignment is to demonstrate an understanding of the content, extra time to complete the assignment or exam is likely an accommodation.	If the objective of the multiplication fact quiz is to demonstrate fact fluency, the allowance of extra time is likely a modification.

Note. This table demonstrates how a strategy can be an accommodation in one context but a modification in another. Source: Texas Education Agency (TEA), 2023, p. 28.

To disentangle some of this confusion, it may be helpful to think of accommodations as a form of exemption.

Thinking of Accommodations as Exemptions

Like two sides of the same coin, an accommodation is a way of exempting a student from an aspect of the environment, teaching, or evaluation. For example, the provision of headphones exempts a student from enduring a noisy environment; the provision of unlimited time exempts a student from time limits on tests; the provision of frequent breaks exempts a student from having to remain focused for extended periods. None of these accommodations/exemptions alter the Ontario curriculum and therefore meet criteria for the technical term *accommodation*.

The distinction between accommodation and modification is slightly trickier in curricular contexts. The use of text-to-speech assistive technology in science or social studies enables students to access grade-level content while being exempt from decoding—a skill that *is not* included in science curriculum and is therefore a true accommodation. The use of text-to-speech

in a primary reading program also exempts students from decoding, but in this context the exemption bypasses skills that are explicitly part of the curricula, making this "accommodation" an actual modification as it is changing the curriculum.

This tricky dynamic raises important questions about how we decide what exemptions a student should work towards. What aspects of the curriculum should be accommodated/exempted rather than taught? In which contexts? At which grade-level? When is it appropriate to decide that a student will not gain a particular skill and should therefore be exempt from learning it?

In 2021, CBC news produced an online segment with the headline "Parent worries assistive technology isn't helping son gain reading skills." In the short segment, a parent expressed frustration that the school introduced assistive technology for his son, effectively exempting him from learning to decode.

[They said] "We can put Noah in front of this electronic device that reads the question out to him and then he can dictate his answer to someone" and... and they couldn't explain-- they couldn't explain to us-- there is literally no plan to get them off that device. Like, the plan is, they have this adaptive device, and they stay on it for, you know, forever, right? It didn't make sense to me how they don't have anything in place to actually help children learn to read. (Parent Worries Assistive Technology Isn't Helping Son Gain Reading Skills, 2021)

This parent's concern illustrates how the use of accommodations can function as a form of long-term exemption, particularly when it is not paired with a clear instructional plan. This is where, in many cases, the simultaneous provision of "intervention" becomes so important, which will be discussed in more detail in the sections below.

Accommodations are often Misunderstood as Intervention

Like the parent in the CBC segment quoted above, some participants erroneously conflated accommodation with intervention. This was evident in comments about accommodations "not working" which suggest a belief that accommodations should lead to improvement in the skill that is being supported or compensated for.

I think what I see is a little bit of, like, accommodation fatigue where they're like, "Okay, I have done so much for them already. Yet we're not-- I'm not seeing any changes or any improvements. I'm not seeing any growth, but I'm adjusting, I'm changing, I'm giving the extra time. I'm doing what I can." And that's where they're just like, "But I don't know what more I can do." Right? So, I think it kinda comes to, I don't know, this concept of fatigue. (Alana, SSEL)

In this comment, the SSEL describes teachers' "accommodation fatigue"—a sense of exhaustion or discouragement after providing multiple supports but not seeing improvement. This implies that there's an expectation that the accommodation should result in observable progress, not just improved access. The comment "I don't know what more I can do" also indicates that accommodations are seen as instructional strategies rather than purely tools to provide access.

This faulty logic is also evident when modifications are described as "a last resort"—a practice that should only be employed when all other strategies, including accommodations, have "failed." The idea that an accommodation has failed implies that it should have succeeded at improving student's capabilities. These comments were common across all participant groups:

I mean, as a teacher, you know, when you see a student is struggling, you're, of course, gonna accommodate. And then when you realize that these accommodations don't work, you naturally modify. (Sena, SSEL)

I think we have to, again, be very careful... it's the last, last possible resort... Modifying should be the very, very last thing we should be doing. (Nancy, Inclusion Consultant)

These examples show how accommodations are often misunderstood as strategies that lead to skill development rather than strategies that provide access in place of an exempted skill. This erroneous conflation of accommodation with intervention inadvertently denies students an opportunity to learn through additional resource support (i.e., "intervention"). Eventually, their failure to progress when accommodations are not provided, further justifies the need for a Modified IEP.

Instruction Must be Provided in *Addition* to Accommodations

At the heart of the tension lies a critical paradox: it is ableist to deny a student an accommodation they are entitled to, but it is also ableist to deny a student the opportunity to learn. The Ontario Human Rights Commission touched on this tension in the 2022 *Right to Read Report* where intervention was deemed to be as essential as accommodations:

Code-related accommodations are distinct from reading interventions, but both are instrumental to facilitating the needs of students with reading difficulties... Schools must never provide accommodations as a substitute for interventions that provide highly systematic and explicit reading instruction. If students need accommodations, schools should provide them together with interventions. Providing assistive technology without reading interventions is damaging,⁸¹ because students lose the opportunity to learn to

⁸¹ In most cases, yes. But, to avoid taking an absolute binary stance, I also want to acknowledge that there may be a few cases where an exemption is appropriate depending on the specific disability.

read. It is also damaging in a more insidious way: it can mask the student's reading difficulties. (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, pp. 315–316)

This statement draws attention to the cost of solely relying on access supports like assistive technology for students who can learn to decode with the provision of effective teaching methods.

This complicated entanglement raises three key areas for critical reflection and productive dialogue: First, which strategy—accommodation or modification—*should* be the "last resort"? One that ostensibly still involves instruction and an opportunity to learn a skill? Or one that exempts a student from learning it completely? How might accommodation, modification, and "intervention" work in concert with each other? Second, in what scenarios might accommodation/exemption without simultaneous "intervention" be appropriate? This difficult question is dependent on determining who has the potential to acquire a skill, and who does not. Such dangerous determinations have tremendous potential to invite racist, ableist and other oppressive assumptions into dilemmatic apparatuses. How can such decisions be made with equity and justice at the forefront? The third area for critical reflection and productive dialogue relates to what constitutes intervention? How should it be understood and delivered with the context of schools? What is the relationship between Modified IEPs and intervention? Can curriculum modifications support student progress?

Accommodations are often positioned as necessary, rights-based supports—what "good teachers" do. But what is an appropriate accommodation in one context may be a modification in another. While assistive technology is absolutely essential in some contexts, it is not always the benevolent panacea it is perceived to be. Critical reflection and productive dialogue are needed to discern when, why and how accommodations/exemptions should be used so that they are sure to enable rather than disable students.

8.2 – Conceptual Clarification: What are Modifications?

Three distinct understandings of how and why curriculum modifications should be used stood out in this research. Each reflects a particular rationale that informs both why teachers initiate curriculum modifications and how they are implemented. In other words, educators' understandings of the purpose of curriculum modifications is part of the apparatus that produces their enactment. When teachers develop or update a Modified IEP, they usually select 3 or 4 specific curriculum expectations that the student will work towards during the term. How these

goals are selected often reflects their understandings of the purpose of curriculum modifications. This section outlines three distinct approaches to curriculum modification and considers how Modified IEPs are often taken up in ways that diverge from their intended purpose.

1. Modifications as a Tool for Inclusion: The Original Intention of Modifications

As explained in Chapters 3 and 5, the concept of *"modification"* emerged in special education literature in the late 1970s and early 1980s during the mainstreaming movement across North America. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975 in the US, and the Education Amendment Act in Ontario in 1980 allowed many disabled students who had previously been excluded from their local neighbourhood schools to access public education for the first time. Program modifications—changing the environment, activity, or learning objective—became a key strategy for including students with high support needs in mainstream schools (D. L. Ferguson & Baumgart, 1991). The concept of *"curriculum modification"* emerged in the late 1990s as a way to require that educators maintain high expectations for disabled students who had previously exclusively followed alternative programs that focused on self-care and life skills. Curriculum modification was a way to provide access to at least a portion of the mainstream academic curriculum for students who would otherwise not have access to it.

Three teachers in this study described using curriculum modifications as a tool for inclusion. Two of them worked with students formally identified with Mild Intellectual Disability (MID) and a variety of *additional* diagnoses that made learning challenging (e.g., a genetic disorder that impacts memory and ADHD). The third teacher was working with a young Autistic student with moderate support needs.

Um, modifications for my particular guy are necessary because if I don't modify for him, he's just a warm body in my room not doing much. And it will be, "Can I go on the iPad?" Right? And that's not what I want. That's not teaching him anything. Um, sure, sometimes he's on the iPad that I will give him, again, to focus on a particular skill, but I have also seen it being a babysitter. And that's not for me. (Selena, Grade 3 Teacher)

In these cases, expectations were selected from the curriculum that would ensure the success of the student in the inclusive space. As one teacher described:

Interviewer: So, when you go to write his page 3s for academics, how do you choose which expectations to put in there?

Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher: All right, so I'm gonna preface this by saying once again [laughs]... this may not be right, but--

Interviewer: There's no right. Don't worry, there is no right.

Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher: I think when I'm choosing his expectations, [I choose] what I think is achievable for him. Like what he could do. And because I want him to be successful, I don't want him to get R's on a modified report card already. So, I think I just look for a few different expectations that I think he could attain.... I wrote stuff for Science, but my VP helped me with it and... he was like, "do you think he can do that?" I'm like, "yeah, he can do that." If I'm like supporting him and like striving for him, he can answer questions about like an incline plane, and [for example] "if I put the thing at the top, what's gonna happen?" Like he can do that. He can do that.

By choosing goals that the student would easily achieve, this teacher ensured success within the inclusive space. She carefully selected components of the program that aligned with the student's strengths and interests creating opportunities for meaningful participation without exposing the student to unnecessary risk of failure. Using modifications in this way—as a tool for inclusion—curriculum expectations are selected based on the students' strengths rather than their deficits, and expectations that are perceived to be beyond the students' reach might be omitted from the IEP altogether.

2. Modification as Grade Retention within a Context of Social Promotion

The data in this study suggests that both grade retention and social promotion continue to operate in the Board through the practice of curriculum modification (Chapter 8). This was particularly evidenced in three teacher participants who viewed Modified IEPs as a way for a student to repeat the subject they had failed (or perceived to have failed) while remaining in the classroom with their same-aged peers. This conceptualization of curriculum modification is premised on two entangled ideas: 1) that the curriculum is designed in a linear, sequential way, without overlap or "spiraling"; and 2) that you must complete one entire grade before you can advance to the next (Chapter 6). Unlike the teachers who used modifications as a tool for inclusion, teachers who understood modifications in this way, wanted to initiate modifications because they believed that their student had not yet achieved pre-requisite standards, and therefore, were not yet ready or had not yet earned the right to work on the current grade level curriculum.

In all three cases, the teachers had very little assessment data to support their observations, demonstrated little knowledge of curriculum expectations, and frequently confused accommodations and modifications. All three teachers also reported that the student was

demonstrating challenging behaviour in the classroom. The following is an excerpt from an interview with a Grade 5 teacher:

Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher: Some students went virtual, some students didn't... So, it looks like the student didn't show up for class ... so we're putting them on an IEP.

Interviewer: Okay, great. And so, what would you say the specific challenges are?

Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher: I would say motivating students to work.

Interviewer: For this specific student?

Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher: Yeah, for this student. Probably interest, motivating them to do his work, be interested in it, finish the work, and focusing during class.

Interviewer: Okay and so how is he performing in his academic areas and his core subjects?

Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher: I will say, below. Below level.

Interviewer: Okay.

Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher: That's why I'm bringing him up. Yeah, so he's not meeting the expectations at his grade-- at his grade level. Yeah.

Interviewer: Um-hm, um-hm. And what specifically are you seeing as a specific challenge in Reading?

Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher: I think, um, retelling or summarizing in detail. Oh, it's, um, when he retells or summarizes [its] very like sparse, and not a lot of information...

Interviewer: Okay. And is it particular texts that you are noticing this with?

Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher: Um, yeah, I would say, any texts that are longer. Because in Grade 5, I would give them different types of texts. So, if it was a shorter text, maybe one or 2 pages, it might be better. If it's one that's like 40 pages, like, for example, a chapter book, um, it'll be harder.

Interviewer: I see, okay, um, okay, and do you have specific examples of texts that he struggled with?

Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher: Specifically? No, not specifically.

Interviewer: Okay.

Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher: 'Cause we did that last term, so I can't really remember.

Interviewer: Okay. I see, Okay. So, when reading, what level should he be modified to?

Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher: Okay, um, we'll have to decide as a team, so I don't know how much. You want me to use my judgment, now? Cause I wouldn't ...

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean, what would you be proposing to the team?

Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher: Well, according to his assessments, done by the resource teacher... maybe grade, um what was it, Grade 3 or 4?

Interviewer: Okay. Great. Do you know what assessments those were?

Anisa, Grade 5 Teacher: Um, I wrote it down somewhere. Um, I think one was just, it was just called something. A fluency test. I don't know exactly.

The underlying logic is that if a Grade 5 student is assessed to be performing at a Grade 4 level (see Chapter 6), they should be returned to a Grade 4 curriculum. In other words, their curriculum level should be retained, while they are socially promoted.

Unlike modifications for the purpose of inclusion—where expectations are selected to guarantee success for the student, modifications for the purpose of grade retention involved unspecified expectations that simply increase by grade level year after year. One Grade 3 teacher described their understanding of how they were supposed to modify:

Lina, Grade 3/4 Teacher: At the beginning of each page, you give them a percentage. You have to give them a percentage of what the student would hopefully learn in the year. So, you could give them, like, "student X would be learning 30% of the Grade 1 curriculum," or "40% of the Grade 2 curriculum"... usually, it's like 40%. If the student, you know, if the student is more capable, then I make it a higher percentage.

Interviewer: Mm, okay... Do you remember what percentage you made for him?

Lina, Grade 3/4 Teacher: I believe his was at, uh, 40% of Grade 1.... That would just be for Math. Yeah. Depends on the strand... like if you have an easier strand like Patterning, that would be more percentage at a higher grade. So, it could be 40% at a Grade 2 level. Whereas, say Number Sense, adding and subtracting would be maybe 30% at a Grade 1 level.

These broad statements of learning expectations (e.g., 40% of the curriculum) lack the specificity needed to support skill development. As a result, students with teachers following this approach are likely to bump along from year to year just as they would have in a social promotion context without having an IEP.

Cloaking the Harms of Retention and Social Promotion Behind the Benevolence of Special Education

The above conceptualization of curriculum modification is another example of a '*policy haunting*' as it reflects the enduring influence of the ghosts of grade retention and social promotion policies over current practices. Interestingly, these ghosts also appear to be haunting participants' perceptions of the practice of curriculum modification as several comments echoed the almost exact same dilemmas raised in the old, yet lingering debate. For example, one administrator commented:

Victor, Administrator: It's almost like Taylorism, right? You're on the conveyor belt. You're moving along the grades no matter what... the accountability of the learner has disappeared, and that-that makes it challenging. Does that make sense?

Moderator: Why do you think that is?

Victor, Administrator: Well, I mean, I-- if I remember correctly, I think the focus became social-emotional well-being as opposed to academic standards, right? So, we have students in our classrooms that are severely behind, but they're sitting in grade cohorts based on age and are unable to access the material that's being presented in front of them.

Another participant questioned whether her student would be better off being retained rather than continuing with social promotion on a Modified IEP because they would be more immersed in the expectations they were working towards:

Sometimes, I wonder if a student is better off being held back and repeating another year than putting them on a Modified IEP. And I say this only because I don't believe that, even with the teacher's best efforts [to differentiate], a modified program would ever equate to what a student would get in a regular classroom at grade level. Does that make sense? (Selena, Grade 3 Teacher)

At the heart of these comments is the sentiment that the practices and debates of grade retention and social promotion persist, despite decades of research demonstrating their harm. Only this time, whether intentional or not, they operate through special education under the guise of individual "support."

The provision of individualized "support" through an IEP is questionable. Although the word "support" implies that something is offered, most often, IEPs simply remove expectations. Accommodations provide "support" by exempting students from being required to learn

particular skills,⁸² and modifications provide "support" by simply lowering expectations for student achievement. In the absence of actual targeted skill-building instruction, IEPs can create a myth of "support" that masks a systemic evasion of responsibility.

By embedding both grade-retention and social promotion within the practice of Modified IEPs, the failure of students to progress is rarely questioned because disability and special education remain saturated with ableist assumptions about who can learn and who cannot. For many students, what remains absent is the very thing that both grade-retention and social promotion failed to provide: "intervention."

3. Modifications as a Map for Intervention

Unlike the first two approaches to curriculum modifications that quietly move students through the system, some teachers used Modified IEPs to document and facilitate a plan for "intervention." This approach is closely related to the concepts of scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development described in Chapter 7. For example, as one vice-principal described their understanding of curriculum modification:

I think it chunks work and gives them smaller goals. So, it's, uh, it-it zeroes in the focus for what we want students to achieve. And those smaller goals allow students to, um, be successful in a shorter amount of time and build on their learning at a very, um, targeted intentional approach.... It does provide a small steppingstone towards the ultimate goal, which is to bring them to grade level.... Especially the year that we do our EQAO. If they're not there yet, how are we going to get them there? Yes, we may need to do a modified curriculum with smaller goals to get them there. (Kimberly, Administrator)

Four teacher participants, all working in high SES schools, shared this understanding of modification. They used the Modified IEP as an intervention plan—documenting which expectations should be taught next in the scaffolded sequence. A Grade 6 teacher with a student working on Grade 3 Math and Reading expectations shared:

Okay, so if I look at her Modified [IEP] again, I was told by the principal, pick three or four expectations per term that you're gonna focus on, and that goes for Math as well. Uh, so for her, it was recall and demonstrate multiplication facts of 2, 5, and 10 and related division facts. Represent multiplication of numbers up to 10 x 10. Uh, some Patterning ones too. You know, I'm only looking at five or six different-different expectations on

⁸² In fairness, IEP accommodations are sometimes achieved with the *provision* of equipment like assistive technology. However, many features of assistive technology have become standard in mainstream devices. Also, access to devices has increased significantly in recent year making the line between special education providing such supports and their general availability blurred.

this. So yes, she's learning other expectations. But when I go to actually, [do] her report card, let's see the progress she's made on these six expectations. That's the main focus.

And I picked those ones because I felt they were the most important, like, things that she's gonna get out of the Grade 3 curriculum. Like, I don't think it is important for her to know like 'likely,' 'least likely,' 'unlikely.' Maybe, but it's not as important as the multiplication. Right? So, yeah, I just picked those kind of five or six most important ones...

And the most important thing for her to focus on [in Reading] was, you know, getting more comfortable using decoding strategies, reading automatic--like reading these high-frequency words. (Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher)

Using a Modified IEP as a way to document an intervention plan reflects a genuine commitment to supporting students who are not yet meeting grade-level expectations (perceived or real). It is a way to document smaller step-by-step goals, sometimes from a variety of grade levels, to close their learning gaps and get them back up to grade-level. However, while well-intentioned, this use of curriculum modifications stretches the tool beyond its original purpose—a tool for inclusion.

Modified IEPs were not designed to be used as intervention plans, and, given the policy ecology that surrounds them, are not well-suited to it. First, as demonstrated in Chapters 5 and 6, some curriculum expectations are extremely vague and there is no shared understanding of grade-level performance, including what skills should be achieved and to what degree. Therefore, when the same vague curriculum expectations are put in the Modified IEP. For example, “write short texts using a few simple forms” in Grade 1 Writing, then “write short texts using several simple forms” in Grade 2 Writing (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006), they do not actually provide a clear, actionable roadmap for scaffolding these skills. Second, even if a Modified IEP can effectively map a pathway for intervention, it is only a piece of paper—it cannot actually deliver the intervention. As Chapters 9 and 10 will demonstrate, access to instruction and intervention is extremely scarce and therefore highly stratified both within schools and across schools. This renders the Modified IEP as a plan with little chance of being fulfilled. Finally, as discussed in this present section, teachers have different conceptions of the purpose of curriculum modifications. If one teacher initiates a Modified IEP for the purpose of mapping an intervention plan, and the following teacher implements it as a tool for inclusion, progress towards the ultimate goal will be compromised. Taken together, the evidence suggests

that using Modified IEPs as a map for intervention, is unlikely to be effective, hence the data demonstrating the long-term retention of Modified IEP presented in Chapter 4.

Even as teachers speak hopefully about the potential for modifications to serve as a kind of intervention, their optimism is tempered by their experience.

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: When implemented correctly and consistently, I do believe it can. I have a-a friend whose daughter was on a Modified IEP and came off of it, so to me, that means her gap was closed, right? But, um, you need to have the supports for the teacher for the student to be able to close that gap confidently as well.

Interviewer: How often do you think gaps are closed through modifications?

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: I-I-I don't wanna say they're closed often. But I want to say the gap is made smaller. I mean, obviously, the end goal is to close the gap, but with different teachers every year, it's hard to close that gap.

While using Modified IEPs as a map for intervention reflects a desire to support students, this approach ultimately fails due to system limitations. The following excerpt from a focus group session demonstrates what is at stake with this failure:

Sharon, SSEL: But then there's another child that came to us who's been through trauma. He's been to 12 different schools. The kid is only in Grade 4! And, um, we're like, "Yeah, no one put him on an IEP? He needs to be on one immediately!"...

Moderator: You said, he needs to be on an IEP immediately. Tell me what the benefits are.

Sharon, SSEL: Well, this child is this child is very, very self-aware. So, what's happening is because he knows that the work is very hard for him, he'll opt out. So, a lot of behavioural stuff. Um, he's wandering around the school all the time because he just-- he knows everything's difficult for him.

So that's when we've really upped giving resource support for him. Giving him some reading support as well... and we moved right away to putting him on a Modified IEP just to-- just for him to finally feel like he's being supported... This is a child who's great in Math, but in Language, uh, he struggles.

But this is a whole long story, [Moderator]. Like, this kid has been a [Children's Aid Society-CAS] case. He just came to our school... We just found out there was a psych done on him through CAS...and he's also living in the shelter. And, yep, never any documentation until this year. We're like, 'No way! We're not doing that to another school. We're not wasting this kid's time any further. This kid feels so awful about himself.'

I took this kid today just to work with him one-on-one. You couldn't believe how happy he was that someone finally was going to teach him to read. 'Cause at the end of the day,

there's only one thing he said that he wants in his school life, he said to me, and that was to be able to read. That's all he wants....

This is where we as educators throw-- honestly, we throw everything else out the window and go, 'I don't need you to know how to divide right now. I don't need to worry about half of these things. I just wanna give you what you want. And if you wanna learn to read, that's what we're gonna do.' Right? All the science curriculum can go out the window. Social studies? I don't really care. 'We're just going to get you what you need.'

Moderator: So, do curriculum modifications make that happen?

[Long pause then simultaneously]

Jennifer, SSEL: Yeah? [hesitantly] **Andrea, SSEL:** No. **Sharon, SSEL:** It depends.

Sharon, SSEL: It depends on how they're-- how well these IEPs are written, to be honest with you...

Laura, SSEL: If, like [SSEL 1] just said, if the modifications are actually done in the classroom, if it's not just a document written to get me off your back [laughter], and ...and if there is some ability to give some extra help. But the modifications alone just written on a piece of paper don't mean anything unless somebody is actually doing them.

As Laura in this focus group explains, the critical piece of the puzzle is having “some ability to give some extra help.” Unfortunately, as Chapter 9 will demonstrate, that ability is severely compromised in today’s context of chronically underfunded schools. But first, in the section below, I present a vision of what a more just and supportive system could look like.

8.3 – A Conceptual Reenvisioning: What is Intervention?

Following the works of Derrida and Gordon, Lea (2024) explains that the term *Policy Hauntology*:

captures policy scars inside people’s bodies and souls, the material and immaterial consequences of past and present-day policy decisions haunting ambient conditions, and the tethers binding imagination and exegesis...policies from the past haunt the present and the future (as historical derangements, as downstream effects, and as ontological bindings, all at once). (p. 11)

In this sense, Lea’s notion of policy hauntology alongside insights from Critical Disability Studies (CDS) illuminate the need for a reimagined form of intervention.

From a CDS perspective, the language of “fixing” or “curing,” such as “intervention,” “rehabilitation,” and “remediation” carries a history fraught with harm and injustice (Davis, 2017; Russell, 1998; Withers, 2024). Many disabled and neurodivergent adults have shared that

their past experiences with intervention and remediation through therapies, surgeries, and educational programs were painful and unnecessary (L. L. Allen et al., 2024; Withers, 2024). Many report that these interventions were imposed, without their informed consent, with an agenda of normalizing or erasing aspects of their identity (Kupferstein, 2019; Wong, 2020). These retrospective reflections must be kept at the forefront of any conversation of how, when, and why “intervention”—or a reenvisioned version I call *supplementary instructional supports*⁸³—should be provided in schools.

One of the primary purposes of elementary education is to teach foundational skills such as decoding, multiplication, and handwriting. This bumps up against reports from some disabled and/or neurodivergent adults who describe their experiences with interventions in these areas as harmful or futile (Hehir, 2004; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022) when they simply could have been accommodated. Yet, within school settings, educators face a unique challenge: without the benefit of hindsight, it is very difficult to predict for whom additional “interventions” will be more harmful than beneficial, and for whom long-term accommodation/exemption is more appropriate. Most students, regardless of ability or neurotype, occasionally require additional instructional support to acquire a skill. The challenge then, is not to critique intervention programs to the point of their rejection, but rather to reimagine how supplementary instructional support can be grounded in the principles of Disability Studies in Education (DSE): with consent, dignity, dialogue, and justice at the forefront.

Envisioning a DSE-Grounded Intervention in Schools

The field of DSE grew into being in 1999 when a group of scholars sought to apply Disability Studies theory to educational contexts (Gabel, 2005). Now a well-established field, DSE aims to bring greater understanding of the social model of disability to special education contexts, which have traditionally drawn heavily from the medical model of disability (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020; Connor, 2019). DSE is based on the principles of centring the voices, interests, and agendas of disabled people, presuming competence, rejecting deficit models of disability, and promoting “social justice, equitable and inclusive education opportunities, and full and

⁸³ In sketching a new vision for intervention and special education, I propose using the term *supplementary instructional supports* instead of the haunted term *intervention*. In the remaining sections and chapters I use both terms for clarity, but often with intervention representing past and present practices, and supplementary instructional supports representing future possibilities.

meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labeled with disability/disabled people” (Connor, 2019, p. 11).

While DSE can and should influence many aspects of education beyond the confines of “intervention” or special education,⁸⁴ I speak of it here in terms of guiding a reimagining of “intervention” models in schools. How do we decide who has the potential to acquire a skill with supplementary instructional support and who should be exempt from it? How do we destigmatize intervention programs? How do we include students in educational decisions? What are the parameters for a child providing consent? How do we judge when to pause or end a program if it is causing distress? These questions are easier asked than answered, but they can guide the discussions as education participants work to create a new vision for DSE-grounded intervention in schools. But first, it is worth pausing to address how disability is operating within the apparatus, and how it shapes teachers’ understanding of IEPs and curriculum modifications in particular.

The analysis presented in this chapter suggests that disability does not function as a stable, pre-determined category that the Modified IEP system is responding to. It is mobilized inconsistently in IEP decisions. Sometimes it was absent entirely. For example, when modifications serve grade retention purposes for students who are not perceived to be disabled. Sometimes it was present in the decision-making apparatuses—particularly for students with formally identified disabilities—yet it did not consistently reflect deficit assumptions about the students’ potential. Teachers frequently recognized that their students could learn but needed additional direct instruction or instruction under different conditions—needs that the system cannot consistently provide. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 7, when teachers advocated for those additional resources, their calls were frequently reframed as evidence of deficit thinking, positioning teachers as wanting to “fix” or exclude their students rather than include them. This double bind, as Chapter 9 will demonstrate, leaves Modified IEPs as the only available response, which makes the reimagining proposed in the following section even more necessary.

⁸⁴ see Erevelles for a discussion on DSE in curriculum theory (Erevelles, 2005), Richmond for a discussion on disability representation in children’s literature (Richmond, 2024), and Baglieri and Lalvani for integrating disability history, pride, and culture into daily lesson plans (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020).

8.4 – What is Special Education and Who Is It For? Toward a Long-Overdue Reimagining

It is time to reimagine special education. For too long, it has been shaped by disability discourses that frame students as in-need of fixing, but paradoxically impossible to fix. At the heart of this conflict is the question: is the intention of special education to remediate or to provide access? In this question we see competition between two polarized models of disability: the medical model which favours “fixing,” and the social model which favours “access.” From a disability standpoint, the medical model’s preoccupation with “fixing” is problematic, but an educational context is different. In an educational context, simply providing “access” without an opportunity for intervention is also problematic.

This tension is entangled with questions of who and why access and/or remediation should be provided. There is a subtle but important difference between *remediating disability* and *remediating low school performance* which may or may not be related to disability. This subtle distinction shifts the conversation from whether or not there is a place for remediation in schools to what should be remediated, as well as when, why, how, and for whom such remediation should take place. In this section, I argue that since special education has become so closely associated with disability, remediation programs, even those grounded in DSE, must be provided within public education, but *outside* of special education services. This critical separation could free special education departments to focus on supporting access, inclusion, and anti-ableism efforts—a fundamental reorientation that could also include an essential name change from the condescending “special” education services (Collis, 2023) to a more justice oriented title such as “accessible education services.”

The Effects of an Intervention Vacuum

Throughout this study, participants wrestled with the tension of who accommodations, modifications, and more broadly, special education were for. Complicated by what Artiles called the educational equity paradox (American Educational Research Association, 2016), many participants wondered if it was intended to support students with disabilities in accessing equitable learning opportunities or had become a catch-all system for managing any student who did not meet standardized expectations (Chapters 7 and 8). Differing views were largely school dependent:

[Its] only if the student has an identified exceptionality from an IPRC that we use the Modified [IEP]. So... we've switched gears towards modifying just students who've been

identified either with a diagnosis, a diagnostic letter from their developmental pediatrician or psychologist. (Kimberly, Administrator)

In our school, it's mostly because they are being very unsuccessful with the grade-level curriculum expectations. And the teachers are modifying within the class anyway to be able to scaffold and support that student. And so then it's really more just a formalization of what they're needing to do anyway for that student. (Alicia, Administrator)

Although IEPs were originally intended as tools to ensure access and participation for students with disabilities, they are increasingly being used to fill a systemic void left by the absence of supplementary instructional support for students who have not yet met grade-level expectations—an intervention vacuum.

Previously, under a policy of grade retention, students who had failed a grade were held back to repeat it. The repetition of a grade was understood as the “intervention.” Under a policy of social promotion, failing students were promoted with their peers, or “transferred” to the next grade level, with the hope that remediation would magically occur with time, maturation, and continued exposure to curriculum and peers working at that level. After decades of polarized debate between these two ineffective approaches, consensus gradually emerged that neither retention nor social promotion alone could adequately address gaps in learning (Chapter 5). What was needed, was sustained, intentional, intervention—an educational necessity that never materialized in the Board. Now, this void is being filled through referrals to special education and the initiation of IEPs, much to the chagrin of the Board’s leaders.

In their 2022-23 *Special Education and Inclusion Annual Report*. The Board included a section on “changing mindsets” which described the need to interrupt the assumption that students who demonstrate learning challenges have special education needs:

As education is an ableist system, a cultural shift continues to be required and work needs to continue to be done with regards to assumptions or perceptions about students’ abilities and future capacities, and even more so when ability intersects with gender, race, class, etc. Specifically, we need to disrupt the following assumptions which are harmful to students: **early years students who demonstrate learning challenges have special education needs**; students are better served elsewhere; and students with special education needs are best served by special education teachers. (Salmon, et al., 2023, p. 8, *emphasis added*)

The difficulty with interrupting this assumption is that if special education is the only way to access supplemental instructional support—a necessity for any student “demonstrating learning challenges,” teachers are forced to choose between special education and the highly problematic

practice of social promotion. Though it is positioned in the Board’s report as a problem of mindset, the actual problem is the lack of an alternative—a way to access intervention outside of the special education system.

Hiding Socially Promoted Students within Special Education

Whether intentional or not, the redirection of failing students to Modified IEPs may create a situation worse than social promotion itself. Special education is saddled with two paradoxical discourses: it is simultaneously expected to “fix” children, yet their failure to be “fixed” is accepted and rarely questioned. When, socially promoted students are redirected to an IEP system that does not provide any *intervention* (as illustrated above and in Chapter 9), their continued lack of progress is explained through deficit-based discourses of disability. This effectively hides the practice of social promotion—a practice known to cause harm to students—within the perceived benevolence associated with special education. What remains absent is the very thing that both grade-retention and social promotion fail to provide: *additional instruction*.

Supplementary Instructional Support is Essential, but not from Within Special Education

Supplementary instructional support is essential for advancing all learners performing below expected standards. However, if it is only available through special education pathways, it produces significant problems. First, it perpetuates a problematic association between disability with low academic performance. Many disabled students do not require remediation; their educational needs often center on access and accommodation, not deficits in skill. Yet, by equating low performance with disability, the system reinforces ableist assumptions about intelligence, potential, and the expectations held for disabled students.

Second, situating remediation within special education perpetuates beliefs that special education exists to “fix” students, rather than to promote access, inclusion, and anti-ableism. As Sullivan and Proctor explain,

the assumption that special education services are either warranted or helpful in remediating deficits for any child with poor academic performance indicates a naivete that requires a decontextualized perception of this unique educational problem... Such a perspective reflects the common, but misguided, notion that special education can “fix” children. (2016, p. 282)

The emphasis on “fixing” reinforces the belief that disability is a deficit to be corrected—a longstanding harmful discourse from the medical model of disability.

Third, when the only access to sustained, supplementary instructional support is available through special education, disability labels are imposed on students, often against the wishes of families who fear the stigma and lowered expectations that can accompany the label. Although reluctance to accept special education or disability may be driven by ableist ideologies, it may also reflect broader structural realities: students already carrying multiple markers of disadvantage may experience greater harm from an additional marked label, including intensified stigma, lowered expectations, and systemic exclusion (Parekh & Brown, 2020).

Finally, providing remediation for all students performing below expected standards within special education places unsustainable demands on an already resource-strained system. As demonstrated in Chapter 9, limited funding, staffing, and program spaces (e.g. Empower Reading), must be triaged, resulting in stratified access for the most capable or “fixable” students, leaving students with higher support needs (or larger skill deficits and educational debts) without adequate support within mainstream classroom placements. The act of triaging students based on perceived ability and potential reproduces disability hierarchies and ultimately fuels a perpetual reliance on self-contained special education classes for disabled students (Chapter 9).

Taken together, these four consequences of providing supplementary instruction support through special education create a system that not only fails to deliver equitable support but actively disables both disabled and non-disabled students.

An Example of a Dual System Approach: New York State

In recognition that the need for supplementary instructional support does not necessarily equate to disability, some jurisdictions separate intervention for low-performing students from special education supports completely. For example, the New York State Education Department provides Academic Intervention Services (AIS) to any student at risk of not reaching Levels 3 or 4 on standards in Language or Math regardless of disability or ELL status (New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers & New York State United Teachers, n.d.). Students receiving AIS are not withdrawn from class. Schools are expected to provide several options for when and how the additional instructional time is delivered, including through push-in supports such as co-teaching, before or after school sessions, evening or weekend sessions, or summer school. AIS is part of the general education program, and every student can access it. As the information guide explains,

Students with disabilities must have access to AIS in the same manner as students without disabilities, that is, by scoring below the designated performance level on state assessments or through the district procedures described in its AIS plan. Academic intervention services are a part of general education and must not supplant special education services. The school district must provide AIS to the “extent consistent” with the student’s individualized education program (IEP). (New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers & New York State United Teachers, n.d., p. 4)

By providing intervention support through the general education program, they minimize the conflation between low academic performance and disability. This approach not only increases access to supplementary instructional supports, but it also helps reduce the mislabeling that can occur when disability/special education becomes the only available pathway for supplementary instructional support. Although I cannot speak to the effectiveness of this model as evaluating it falls well beyond the scope of this study, I share it here as an intriguing example of a possibility that warrants further investigation, consideration, and productive dialogue.

The process of reimagining accommodations, modifications, IEPs, and special education more generally, must be a collaborative effort grounded in the lived experiences of those most directly impacted by the system: students, families, and the educators who work most closely with them. Reforms that fail to centre these voices risk reproducing the very inequities they aim to address.

Concluding Thoughts

Altogether, this chapter demonstrates the entangled apparatus of accommodations, modifications, and intervention. These material-discursive forces cannot be understood in isolation. When one is understood in a particular way, or is inconsistently and inadequately provided, the shapes of the other forces change. At the applied level, the absence of intervention has produced the contours of both accommodations and modifications in the Board as they shift to fill the void—both misappropriated in ways that undermine their original purposes. Also reappearing in this apparatus are the unresolved ghosts of social promotion and grade-retention policies, and the fraught policy hauntology of intervention methods resulting from the hegemonic dominance of the medical model of disability in special education. Together, these forces produce a critical need for supplementary instructional supports grounded in the principles of DSE to be provided in public schools, but outside of the realm of special education. By introducing such a program outside of special education, it may become possible to disrupt the deficit medicalized logics that have long dominated special education and open more space

to focus on access, equity, and anti-ableism. The broader implications of these findings, including how disability is mobilized within and through the apparatus of curriculum modification are taken up again in Chapter 11. But first it is necessary to examine how access to supplementary instruction support is currently produced—and constrained—in schools.

Chapter 9: Results and Discussion

Scarcity, Triage, and the No Choice Reality of Modified IEPs

Schools are complicit in the reproduction of privilege and disadvantage (Apple, Au, and Gandin 2009; Ball 2008). Education is not . . . a mirror of social or cultural inequalities. That is all too still an image. Education systems are busy institutions. They are vibrantly involved in the production of social hierarchies. They select and exclude their own clients; they expand credentialed labour markets; they produce and disseminate particular kinds of knowledge to particular users. (Slee, 2013, pp. 899–900)

In Chapter 8, I examined the entangled intra-actions of modifications, accommodations, and interventions,⁸⁵ demonstrating how intervention (or lack of it) is a key force in the curriculum modification ecosystem. In this chapter, I extend this line of inquiry, probing deeper into the *Apparatus of Intervention Provision* by tracing the forces that enable and constrain its provision in schools. In Section 9.1, I provide some background information regarding the Board's journey towards inclusive education which will contextualize the sections that follow. In Section 9.2, I begin to trace the forces entangled within the *Apparatus of Intervention Provision and Scarcity* which include: class sizes, competing student needs, conflicting IEP policies, structured literacy interventions, the ghosts of the half-time special education class policy, polarized positions on inclusive versus special education, service delivery models of the resource teacher, staffing allocations, fractional vice-principal positions, supply teacher shortages, and overall funding cuts to education, and a problematic scarcity of intervention supports that creates the need to triage students based on perceived ability and potential. Although the configurations of these forces vary to some degree from school to school, they produce two common effects: Modified IEPs (a.k.a., social promotion) as the only option for many students, and a discrepancy between the Board's policy rhetoric of "inclusion" and a policy reality of "integration." This difference that makes a difference then produces its own effects: stratified access to intervention and a self-sustaining feedback loop that reproduces social inequities; an emotional cost to teachers for failing to perform the "good, inclusive teacher" which may be related to increasing

⁸⁵ In Chapter 8, I introduced the term "supplementary instructional support" to replace "intervention" to denote the need for a reimagined form of intervention grounded in CDT and DSE. However, as this chapter describes existing models rather than reimagined ones, I continue to use the word intervention here.

teacher attrition; and the production of antagonizing discourses that threaten the inclusive education movement (Section 9.3).

9.1 – The Context for Inclusive Education in the Board

Inclusive education is foundational to equity, justice, and the full participation of every learner in schools. Yet, the term “inclusive education” has many different understandings depending on personal values, lived experiences, and broader political forces (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). In 2017, Nilholm and Göransson published a literature review investigating how inclusive education was defined in academic literature. They identified four⁸⁶ different categories of definitions as follows:

- (a) placement definition – inclusion as the placement of pupils with disabilities/in need of special support in general education classrooms;
- (b) specified individualised definition - inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of pupils with disabilities/pupils in need of special support;
- (c) general individualised definition – inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of all pupils; and
- (d) community definition – inclusion as the creation of communities with specific characteristics (which could vary between proposals). Each category subsumes the preceding one. (p. 441)

Despite the wide variation in how inclusion is conceived, there is a general consensus that inclusion is about more than just placement (Mitchell, 2015b; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017; Slee, 2013). According to the United Nations’s *General Comment Number 4* of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD):

Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences. (General Comment No. 4: Article 24 (Right to Inclusive Education), 2016, ¶ 11)

⁸⁶ Nilholm and Göransson (2017) also acknowledged a fifth category of inclusion definitions where the needs of disabled students are met in any setting, including self-contained classes; however, they exclude this category from their study as they believe that placement is an essential criterion in defining inclusive education.

Mistakenly, “*inclusion*” is often conflated with “*integration*”—the placement of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms without providing the necessary resources to support their physical, social, emotional, or academic needs. The United Nations CRPD draws a clear distinction between inclusion and integration:

Placing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without accompanying structural changes to, for example, organization, curriculum and teaching and learning strategies, does not constitute inclusion. Furthermore, integration does not automatically guarantee the transition from segregation to inclusion. (General Comment No. 4: Article 24 (Right to Inclusive Education), 2016, ¶ 11)

In other words, genuine inclusion requires transformative systemic change rather than the mere physical presence of students with disabilities in general education settings (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020; Kozleski, 2020; Mitchell, 2015b).

It is important to note that even inclusive education models often still include some degree of withdrawal support. In other words, inclusion and withdrawal are not mutually exclusive. This is evident in much of the research comparing inclusive versus self-contained special education program placements where the inclusion models are often defined as placements where students involved with special education spend greater than 50% of their school day in general education classes (K. Barron, Collis, et al., 2024). This aligns with Ontario’s IPRC placement option of *regular class with withdrawal assistance* where students are “placed in a regular class and [receive] instruction outside the classroom, for less than 50% of the school day, from a qualified special education teacher” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022b). Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education’s most inclusive placement category is defined as students educated inside the regular class for 80% or more of the day (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2023). The idea that inclusive education models can include an element of withdrawal support is important when considering the Board’s tiered approach to intervention—an approach that necessitates short periods of withdrawal in order to deliver some Tier 2 and Tier 3 strategies, particularly for some structured literacy interventions.

In 2017-18, the Board began the necessary process of reducing the prevalence of self-contained special education classes, particularly the half-time special education classes where students’ spent roughly 50% of the school day. This move was in the name of inclusion. In a letter to parents, they wrote:

We want every student in every school to be welcomed and included within the most enabling learning environment. The [Board] is transitioning towards greater inclusion in

Special Education programs. Providing children with special education needs with the instructional support and services they need within the regular program in neighbourhood schools will improve achievement and well-being for all students... We believe we can improve the learning environment for all students in the regular class with appropriate resources. (U. Robinson, 2018)

As the Board was closing the half-time special education programs in 2017-18, the special education teachers assigned to teach in those programs were reallocated to support the same students within their regular classrooms (Toronto District School Board, 2016, 2019). Similar to existing resource teachers, the teachers formerly in the half-time special education classes were to provide “push-in” support and engage in co-teaching arrangements for at least 50% of the school day (Toronto District School Board, 2019). Several scholars have reported on the success of push-in co-teaching initiatives in other jurisdictions (Friend et al., 2010) and similar observations have been made in the Board (Parekh, 2020b).

Unfortunately, several years since the elimination of the half-time special education classes, participants in this study report that these special-education teacher allocations have been reduced significantly in their schools, and in some cases eliminated completely, leaving the remaining resource teachers spread incredibly thin. As the excerpts from interviews and focus groups presented below will demonstrate, these reductions in special education staffing have resulted in insufficient instructional support which ultimately reveals that the Board’s attempt to actualize “inclusive” education has amounted to little more than “integration.”

9.2 – The Apparatus of the Provision and Scarcity of Intervention

Although teachers can often meet the needs of many learners through inclusive classroom practices such as DI, UDL, and CRRP (Chapter 7), data in this study show there can be limits to what a single teacher can provide, particularly in large classes with competing student needs. In such contexts some students require Tier 2 and Tier 3 strategies—targeted instruction beyond what classroom teacher can logistically manage on their own. Additional support from resource teachers, whether through push-in or withdrawal models, is also limited due to timetabling challenges, limited staffing, school culture, and the growing demand for support. This shapes the contours of the support offered (i.e., structure, content, frequency, number of students), and ultimately who has access to intervention—a key apparatus in the curriculum modification ecosystem (Chapter 8). In the sections below, I sketch the intra-actions of these forces. First, those that constrain regular classroom teachers. Then, those that shape access to school-based

interventions. Taken together, this section highlights the scarcity of intervention available in schools.

The Limitations of Ideologically Inclusive Teachers

Many of the teachers in this study were deeply committed to inclusive education. They welcomed, and some even requested that the specific students discussed in this study be in their classes. They described the care they took to ensure that their student had a genuine sense of belonging in the classroom community and consistently described and demonstrated good teaching practices. Yet, they felt that their student still needed more instructional, emotional, and behavioral assistance than what they were able to provide alone in the classroom. The examples below demonstrate that even when teachers are deeply committed to inclusive values, systemic constraints, such as large class sizes and insufficient staffing, can undermine their efforts. One Grade 2 teacher shared how despite her best efforts, she was not able to provide enough academic instruction for the student to reach his academic potential, which led to the family's decision to accept a placement in a self-contained autism program for the following year.

Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher: So, I actually requested him to be in my class 'cause we have a relationship, and I just thought that would make the transition easier for him. So, from the get-go, there are things that I put in place for him, like having my prep at the same time every day, having my schedule be consistent every day... Like, those are his strengths, and so I'm trying to work with that. But it's, like-- he's definitely struggling academically, which was why I said that's more why I wanted him in the other program. I can manage his behaviour. Like I said, my class loves him. Like he's definitely a member of my class. Like it's not like he's different. That's not how they look at him. And I can manage him in my class. It's just I feel like he's not getting the academic program that he deserves...

Interviewer: Yeah. And is behaviour primarily the reason why he's been offered the placement, or... primarily why you sought the placement?

Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher: Yes and no. No, not primarily. I would say it's definitely a piece of it, but his academic needs are just, um-- Well, because of his behaviour, then it also takes me away from the rest of the class so much so that I have less time to focus on his academic needs one-on-one. So, I just-- his academic needs definitely are not being met in the classroom.

Interviewer: Okay.

Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher: Um, yeah, like sometimes I-- And I said this to his mom and I feel awful, but I like have to give him an iPad so I can try to teach a lesson sometimes so that I can do a lesson for the rest of the class and then I can work with a small group

with him after and I reteach it to him and with a small group that needs the reteaching anyways.

In this case, the student had recently been put on a Modified IEP in several subjects. He was progressing towards those goals; however, the teacher wanted more for him. She strongly believed that he could learn to read and write and progress through the curriculum if he had access to more targeted instruction than she alone could provide in class, but supplementary instruction and intervention were not available to her student through the school (see section below), so the choice was between letting him progress on a highly Modified IEP (with modification used as a tool for inclusion) or access more targeted teaching within a self-contained special education class.

Another teacher described a similar experience of requesting that a student be in their class, designing a program with them in mind, and then realizing that, despite their best efforts, the student was not progressing as they had hoped. In this case, the teacher was strongly advocating (to no avail) for additional instructional support from a resource teacher to help the student reach his potential. Her disappointment and frustration were palpable:

Interviewer: Tell me more. Like how does it feel working with him?

Grace, Grade 5/6 Teacher: Totally annoying. I like him. I was glad that he was in my class. I asked for him to be in my class, and, uh, you know. And I've met him before, and I was aware of his challenges, and really liked the parent, and thought we could do things together. That was when I thought I'd have a class of 20, not realizing I was gonna start the year with a class of 26.⁸⁷ And he's not the only needy-- you know, student who needs-- who has needs beyond what the regular classroom can support. Um, so, yeah. I am frustrated. I feel like this is a year that he had an opportunity to make some great leaps, and we haven't been able to do it.

Interviewer: So that's why you are advocating for withdrawal support?

Grace, Grade 5/6 Teacher: Yeah. Or in the class. [It] doesn't have to be withdrawal. There's the inclusion model where someone comes in and works with a couple of kids, that would be excellent...

[later in the interview]

But again, this is what's so frustrating: I really feel that if someone sat down with him for 40 minutes, like three or four times a week to get him sort of into the groove, he would be able to pull off B's.

⁸⁷ Six students over the recommended class cap for this type of program.

In this case, the teacher believed that her student could be capable of achieving B's at grade-level, if he had access to some form of intervention to close some gaps and build his confidence—something she simply could not provide consistently in her busy classroom context. Unfortunately, in this particular situation, since the student was already technically in a special education program (a gifted class), he was not eligible for in-class or withdrawal supports. This reflects a common stereotype of gifted students as over-achievers, that ignores the reality that many have “spikey” learning profiles and may require intervention in some areas (Webb et al., 2016). This situation also highlights how despite the teacher's best efforts in the classroom and tireless advocacy for school-based supports, the student could not access intervention, leaving modifying the curriculum as the only option.

The Limitations of School-based Instructional Supports

The Board has traditionally followed a withdrawal model for resource support.⁸⁸ In this pull-out model, small groups of students are withdrawn from their homeroom classes for short periods of the day (e.g., 30-45 minutes) to access Tier 2 or Tier 3 programs delivered by the resource teacher as per the Board's tiered approach to intervention (Toronto District School Board, 2020, p. 18). It is important to note that as part of the tiered approach, resource teachers provide supplementary instructional support to both students with IEPs (e.g. students involved with special education) and students without IEPs (e.g., students who have been “flagged” for performing below provincial standards but are not included in special education data). Based on participant reports, the specific contours of resource withdrawal models varied significantly across schools and were often shaped by the ratios of supply and demand in each school. Sometimes students were pulled out several times a week and sometimes only periodically throughout the year. Sometimes the program aligned with what the classroom teacher was doing (a work completion model), and sometimes it was based on lessons developed by the resource teacher. Many participants also reported that their school used the resource withdrawal model to deliver structured literacy interventions purchased by the school or the Board. In roughly two thirds of these cases, participants specifically identified a reading intervention program called Empower Reading developed out of Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto, Ontario (Panda et al., 2024).

⁸⁸ Resource withdrawal programs should not be confused with the Board's former half-time special education classes where students were placed in a self-contained special education class for roughly 50% of the school day (Parekh, 2013a).

In recent years, some schools in the Board have been making an effort to redesign their resource support models so that supplementary instruction is provided to students within their homeroom classes (Toronto District School Board, 2024b, p. 33). In this “push-in” model, resource teachers go into classrooms to provide additional instructional support (Friend et al., 2010).

It became clear during the interviews and focus group sessions that every school had a unique configuration of forces that produced the contours of their resource support programs. These entangled forces determined if, when, and how resource teachers could provide supplementary instructional supports and, in turn, if, when, and how students could access them—in other words, *Apparatuses of Intervention Provision and Scarcity*. Key forces entangled in these apparatuses were staffing allocations, timetabling, school culture, ideologies, resource support models, the use of commercial intervention programs, and number of students in need—all of which intra-acted in complicated ways producing who had access to supplementary instructional support, and who would have to rely on the classroom teacher’s ability to provide it. These forces are outlined below.

Staffing Allocations and the Impact on Resource Support Models

A significant force shaping access to supplementary instruction is the number of resource teachers allocated to a school. Several participants discussed how difficult it was for the resource teachers to reach all of the students identified as needing their support. One principal described the staffing challenges she faced in her small school.

I have a 0.5 resource teacher... How do you service all of the kids that have IEPs and still manage all of the children in the [self-contained special education] program? Making sure that they get everything that they need and funding? We run the Empower Program but that takes up 50% of that 0.5 resource time. So, you know, any given classroom, if they need resource support, they're limited to about four periods in a week [across the whole school]. Um, and that's really difficult to split between literacy, numeracy, or anything else that they might need... It's really, really challenging. We also don't have an ELL [English Language Learner] teacher that's housed in the building. [It's] itinerant only. So, you know, they're in the school two mornings a week... So, we-we give [the students] the best we can. (Donna, Administrator)

Participants in larger schools also reported being spread thin across the many students and many classrooms they served. A SSEL in a large K-8 school described how it was simply not possible to provide consistent “push-in” support in so many different classrooms, even within the intermediate division alone.

So, there's nine classes I have to support... At one time, we used to keep [students with IEPs] in two homeroom classes, and then that was not fair to the teachers... It's a heavy [paperwork] load. So then like, it's not fair.... So, then you-you spread them in all the different, you know, classrooms, which is fine. I understand that, but our allocation hasn't increased. So, I'm one person, plus my prep, plus SSEL. I can't go there as systematically as I would in the past, if that makes sense. (Jane, SSEL)

A SSEL in another large middle school described the same experience and explained that a withdrawal model was the only way to get to as many students as possible. Further to that, he could not provide any intervention programs (i.e., structured literacy) during the withdrawal periods as his classroom needed to remain open as a drop-in centre for any student with resource withdrawal on their IEP:

So, because of the sheer number of students that we have to support... what I've done is scheduled my resource [class] open [during] every class. Any period I have that I am there for support, is open to any of my classes because it's the only way that I can provide the most possible support is for them to come to and work with me.... I can't get into the [homeroom] class specifically and work with them in there. (Lucas, SSEL)

From an intervention perspective, this approach to resource support is very limited. While teachers can provide additional support to help students complete their work, it may not necessarily lead to advancing the student in their learning. One SSEL discussed feeling underutilized in such a work-completion model and therefore developed her own structured intervention to deliver instead:

What I found the resource program ended up being for is really-- it's all about work completion. It's just about keeping kids focused and finishing their work. And so, it's just like I'm a body. Like, I could have anyone sitting there. Like, I could just-- like, we could have parents doing that in the school! We could have volunteers doing it! So I've tried to create some specific programs: I'm doing a structured spelling program that, you know, I've-I've assessed-- like at the beginning of the year I assessed all the junior classes and collected out the kids who needed the structured spelling program. I have a more structured math program... I've got some letter recognition groups. (Alana, SSEL)

In this case, the teacher was able to shift her resource program to structured intervention (albeit not necessarily an evidenced based one) and still reach the number of students she was supposed to serve. As illustrated above, this was not the case in other schools. The important takeaway here is that resource support, not matter the format of the model (push-in or pull-out) does not necessarily equate access to intervention—an important distinction for future research.

The Impacts of a Fractional VP Allocations

The availability of resource teachers was also impacted by the vice-principal allocations in participants' schools. In the first case illustrated in the section above, the Grade 2 teacher had tried advocating for more supplementary instructional support from a resource teacher.

Unfortunately, such school-based support was not available, thus increasing the pressure for him to transfer to a self-contained special education program in the following year. When asked:

What does the resource model look like in your school? she responded:

Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher: Well [pause. smiling], we have a halftime VP, and they are Resource.

Interviewer: [groans and laughs] I hear this a lot. Tell me about it.

Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher: There you go.⁸⁹ I will say this VP does take a group of students for one period a day. They are junior students on an IEP, and he takes them for a reading group and I'm not sure what else he does with his time. In terms of the resource role, it gets collapsed a lot, as it has my whole time I've been at the school through four VPs. The halftime VP being in the [Resource] support role is terrible. Like, I really wish they could be in a prep role and just make them do that and not collapse them all the time. I get why,⁹⁰ like, the support is flexible, but then these are the kids that like get dropped all the time.

When resource roles are combined with vice-principal allocations, support for students can be inconsistent as administrative duties often take precedence over instructional support. This often leaves the most vulnerable learners without consistent access to the help they are meant to be receiving.

Ripple Effects of Supply Teacher Shortages

Similarly, participants reported that resource support was frequently cancelled even when it was not assigned to a fractional Vice-Principal. Resource teachers are often used in emergency situations when a vacancy has not been filled by a supply teacher. Participants reported that this

⁸⁹ When schools are allocated a 0.5 vice-principal (or other fractions like a 0.75 or a 1.5), the position needs to be combined with a 0.5 of a teaching position. Resource and ELL positions are often combined with those VP positions because it is less disruptive than having a homeroom class split between two 0.5 teachers, but also because if there is an incident (e.g., a fight, an urgent parent concern, a staffing shortage), the VP/resource teacher can simply cancel their withdrawal program or co-teaching supports for the day—an unfortunate domino effect of understaffed school offices.

⁹⁰ While some schools may choose to combine their fractional VP with a teaching position that delivers prep time to homeroom teachers (often music or gym depending on the school) many choose not to because if prep periods are cancelled, the school must find a way, often by hiring a supply teacher, to “pay back” teachers’ lost prep time. Conversely, when a VP cancels the periods allocated to Resource or ELL withdrawal programs, the students simply remain in their classes and there are no financial repercussions, only ethical ones.

was happening frequently in their schools, especially since Covid-19. These cancellations impact the consistency of intervention and, as one participant described, was especially disappointing to her student who often looks forward to that instructional time.

Interviewer: Does he go to resource support?

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: He does. He does. He goes to resource support with another student every day for about 30 minutes.... And it makes a difference because that's a time where he knows he has the teacher's full attention to work with him. And he knows I don't have that.... And he looks forward to it.

Of course, when there's a [supply teacher] shortage, the spec-ed teachers are always the ones pulled, and he will know. He'll go, "Is Ms. [resource teacher] taking me today?" And he'll say, "What time is Ms. [resource teacher] coming?" He usually knows what time it is, and if that time passes, he'll say, "Am I going to Ms. [resource teacher] today?" Or if we see her in the hallway, he'll say, "You didn't take me today." So, it's-it's-it's a harsh reminder of how finely split teachers are in terms of time.

When resource teachers are routinely redeployed to fill staffing shortages, students not only lose valuable instructional time, but also a predictable moment of connection many students might look forward to in their day.

Educations Cuts and the Further Reduction of School-based Support

Several participants noted that the availability of resource support was going to decrease further in the following school year. At the time of the interviews and focus groups some participants had just been informed of their new resource teacher allocations: In one school, a SSEL reported that their resource teacher allocation dropped: "We lost a 0.5 [resource teacher]" (Grace, SSEL). In another school, a teacher participant reported:

[We] lost a 1.0 [resource teacher] and even our ESL allocation went down as well. And our school is a feeder school for the refugee hotels nearby, so we have many students who are ELL learners. (Selena, Grade 3 Teacher)

Another SSEL shared that her position as the resource teacher was changing because of a drop in VP allocation, which demonstrates again the role of administrator allocations in the intervention and curriculum modification ecosystem.

Jane, SSEL: I'm a resource teacher, but I'm being asked next year to teach some French, so I won't be doing as much resource.

Moderator: Did your allocation drop?

Jane, SSEL: [frustration noise with eye roll] Our VP dropped, so we're down to a 0.5 VP. So, to keep the VP in the office, it's 0.5 VP, 0.5 resource. So, I don't know how much intervention's gonna happen.

The scarcity of resource teachers, whether through their own minimal allocations or through the domino effects of other staffing shortages, directly impacts the provision of intervention.

Antagonistic Views of Push-in vs Pull-out Supports: Can One Size Fit All?

In addition to the forces described above, the broader polarized debate that pits special against inclusive education has trickled into whether resource support should be delivered through push-in or pull-out methods—a tension that further influences access to intervention in schools.

As explained above, even though inclusive education models often contain a withdrawal component for short portions of the day, some proponents of inclusive education remain conflicted about the issue. From one perspective, withdrawing students even for a short period of time can have negative consequences. It can cause stigma by signaling to peers that the students are different or less capable, it can cause students to miss out on regular classroom instruction or activities, it can reinforce the idea that the deficit lies within the student, not the classroom context, and it can undermine inclusion by strengthening the idea that some students belong elsewhere (Parekh, 2022a). Based on research on the Board's half-time special education program, Dr. Gillian Parekh reported that ableist notions embedded in classroom and school environments make the act of leaving the classroom for extra support harmful for some students:

[participants] spoke about kids being embarrassed by having to leave their class to go to a different room for extra help and how this led to them being treated differently by their friends and teachers. The pervasive theme across many of the interviews with children was just how bad they felt about being pulled out of class and treated differently from their peers based on the assumption that they were less capable. It hurt. And the stigma they experienced followed them from the classroom, to the playground, and all the way home. (Parekh, 2022a, p. 63)

In response to these consequences, and to facilitate the elimination of the half-time special education program, the Board has been encouraging a shift towards resource teachers providing their instructional support within homeroom classes—"push-in" supports (Toronto District School Board, 2019). As one of the Inclusion Consultants explained,

There are kids that withdrawing them further traumatizes them because, well, 'you're pulling me out of my space,' right? 'And why am I different?' Whereas if we're in the classrooms and doing the co-teaching piece like the resource teacher with the teacher,

then that piece becomes a natural coexistence... You're not meant to walk into the classroom and straightaway notice those students who are getting resource support... They're meant to have multiple entry points into something, and the resource teacher is there to add an extra body to provide support along with the teacher. (Nancy, Inclusion Consultant)

While this concern is not unfounded, there is a risk that these observations can be taken up with a binary mindset that presumes that push-in supports will resolve the issues. While in some cases this can be true, any binary, universalizing assumption can obscure or reproduce other issues.

As several participants explained, push-in resource supports worked for some students but not others depending on the student, the classroom context, and the type of support being provided. They reported that they could sometimes provide support with work-completion and re-teaching concepts with small groups of students, but delivering structured intervention programs (i.e., Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports) within the push-in model was challenging, if not impossible, and faced similar drawbacks to the resource withdrawal model.

One Grade 5 teacher explained how her student found it embarrassing when the other students could see what he was working on—goals that were significantly below his grade-level. Others, particularly those working in junior and intermediate divisions, described how the classroom conditions were just too crowded and distracting to be able to provide effective interventions. The excerpt below demonstrates how ideologies of inclusion entangle with service delivery models, class sizes, and the Board's policy of a tiered approach to intervention, to produce another large discrepancy between policy rhetoric and reality.

Grace, SSEL: Um, this year there's no withdrawal... my new principal changed all program placements [on IEPs of “unidentified” students] to resource [as opposed to withdrawal assistance], with the exception of [two students] that had “withdrawal” based on an IPRC decision... Everyone else is being serviced in class.

Moderator: And do you go in the classroom as a push-in support?

Grace, SSEL: I do. And it's ineffective.

Jane, SSEL: Yeah, I agree with you... It's not enough. I find the students that are struggling with literacy and writing, especially if they're two to four years behind, it's not enough for-for myself or another resource teacher to go in and support. They-they need more. They need more systematic, direct instruction... Especially since class sizes-- Um, I mean, I know the primaries are under 20, but for us, our 4-8s, we're over 30! And like 28, 29. So there's too much going on in a classroom to be effective.

Moderator: In the withdrawal program, are you offering an intervention support? I heard you mention Empower and Wilson. Are you offering anything like that pushed into the class?... Or is it work completion support?

Jane, SSEL: ...So no. Like there's just no way. Um, they do get literacy intervention through Lexia [a computer program designed to teach literacy skills], and so they are doing that in their classrooms. And I'm supporting them and then they get, you know, either direct instruction or small group within their classroom. Could be literacy, could be math. Sometimes it's at their desk one-on-one. Sometimes I'm pulling kids to a back table and trying my best to consolidate, you know, trying to say, "Okay, who's got a similar need in the moment?" But it's-it's ineffective... Especially because most of my students-- and this isn't the only reason, this is one of the reasons-- most of my students... have ADHD, so trying to provide that level of instruction, that intensity in a classroom with 32 kids, it doesn't work. I can't focus. And they can't focus for sure!

As these participants acknowledged, being withdrawn from the classroom can be stigmatizing, but not progressing with reading, writing and math skills can also cause stigma. Some teachers really grappled with this tension. Some felt that a policy of one model or the other—a one-size-fits-all approach, would not benefit all students in their schools.

So, this is from the board and our principal: there's no withdrawal. You don't want the kids to feel ostracized. And I get all that.... I-I get that. But the withdrawal model-- I-I don't think it's like a one size fits all. Like you shouldn't do a withdrawal model, or you should. Like, I just feel like that's a disservice to some kids who would be better supported getting pulled from the classroom. And I also think when one kid at a time gets supported [in-class] when there could be a group of students, I think less kids are getting serviced. (Colleen, Grade 2 Teacher)

As with many polarized debates, nuance has been lost amid binary views that one approach as better than the other. In practice, some students benefit more from push-in supports while others benefit more from pull-out supports. To further complicate things, it is possible that a single student can experience simultaneous benefit and harm from either approach, or that experiences can change depending on contextual factors such as subject area, classroom environment, or social dynamics. Unfortunately, antagonistic or polarized conversations, research, and policies that position one model as the best, undermine an agonistic reality—one in which benefit and harm must be held in tension, and understood in the context of a specific student in a specific moment. It is within this third space where more meaningful conversations about equity and sound decision-making can occur (Bibby, 2010).

In some schools, administrators saw the value of both approaches and luckily had sufficient allocations to be able to provide a combination of both pull-in and pull-out resource

support. A Vice-Principal in one such school described (although somewhat sheepishly) how they adjusted their approach based on individual student needs and preferences:

We've, uh, invested in some withdrawals. I mean, depending on the student, if they can handle the withdrawal, so that we can do small focused, small group instruction. We've invested in, especially for language, we've invested into two programs: our Foundations program, which is an American program but has been hugely successful as a Tier 2 strategy to bring our students to where they need to be; [and] our Empower program, which is an expensive program, but again, a targeted Tier 2 strategy. Um, and, um, we've been using that with withdrawal support.

There's been a couple of students who have had trouble being-- uh, like they don't like [being withdrawn from class] to see them. They think they're not the smartest kids if they're going, but they're going in groups and small groups, three students, four students so there's a comradery. Um, but it- that doesn't work for every student. Um, and what I've seen is parents saying they don't want it. They don't like it. It's- it's- it's- it's not confidence boosting. So, our teachers are going into the classroom and that's where we're using Lexia.⁹¹ (Kimberly, Administrator)

Ultimately, this seemed to be the most inclusive approach to address the varying needs and comfort levels of students. Rather than debating the value and harms of in-class support and withdrawal support, more agnostic discussion is needed regarding how, when, and why each of these approaches serves a purpose. Ideally, as described above, schools would have sufficient allocations to provide both options so that sound decisions can be made to reflect the common saying: “the right tool, for the right student, in the right moment.”⁹²

Limited Spaces and the Heartbreak Reality of Triaging Students for Essential Supports

Almost every participant brought up the topic of the *Empower Reading Program*—a reading intervention program developed by Dr Maureen Lovett at Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto (Panda et al., 2024). Like other direct instruction, mastery-based programs, *Empower Reading* is a set of intervention modules for teaching decoding, word reading, vocabulary, and text comprehension which are often described as the “core learning problems facing children that struggle with reading” (Panda et al., 2024, p. 357). Several studies have demonstrated the efficacy of Empower Reading in both research and school settings (Lovett et al., 2022; Panda et al., 2024), particularly for students who receive the intervention in Grades 1 and 2 (Lovett et al.,

⁹¹ Lexia is a computer-based phonics program that is used as a Tier 2 strategy in the Board. Students can independently engage with the software to improve their literacy skills (Lexia, 2023).

⁹² An unattributed maxim often spoken in the Board, and one of my own core values in teaching.

2017) and for students whose reading difficulties are less severe at the start of the intervention (Panda et al., 2024).

The program is delivered by a resource teacher to groups of four to six students for 50-60 minutes per day, 4-5 days a week for the duration of the school year (Lovett et al., 2017; Panda et al., 2024). Participants whose schools were offering Empower consistently described it as being highly effective for participating students. However, they also reported that access to the program was severely limited. Only a small number of students could participate due to both the high cost of the program and the availability of resource teachers to deliver it. Consequently, their schools were forced to triage students based on who was most likely to demonstrate rapid progress in the program, leaving others who may have also benefited without access to Empower, and sometimes without access to structured interventions all together. One participant described the process of selecting students for the program:

Interviewer: So, who qualifies for the Empower program? ...

Sarah, Grade 4/Resource Teacher: Um they were looking for students specifically with, um, pretty good memory, um, but weak in certain areas.... weak in vowels, weak in being able to blend words, to take the vowels and blend them. Um, difficulties segmenting words.

Interviewer: So, the phonemic awareness stuff. I mean that's what Empower is designed for. But how many students in your school were accepted into the program? And how many were considered for the program? And who made those decisions?

Sarah, Grade 4/Resource Teacher: That was me. Um, I made those [decisions].

Interviewer: You, being the resource [teacher]?...

Sarah, Grade 4/Resource Teacher: Yeah. Um, so obviously uh two days of training is what we got. Um, virtual training. And they were like, "Okay, use your screeners, pick your students. If you have difficulties call your mentors. They'll come in and they'll help you." That was our-kind of guidelines. Um, so we went through the screeners. We looked for students, um, who had some skills, some-some phonemic awareness, some, uh, letter sounds recognitions that kind of stuff.

Interviewer: How many?

Sarah, Grade 4/Resource Teacher: Seven. I took seven students.

Interviewer: You took seven? How many--

Sarah, Grade 4/Resource Teacher: How many did I look at? Oh, goodness. I would say probably 25 to 30.

As described in Chapter 2, this study recruited ten classroom teachers who were currently undergoing (or had recently undergone) the process of initiating a Modified IEP for their students. The ten participating teachers discussed a total of 12 students—ten of whom were struggling in the area of Reading (two students were only being considered for modification primarily in Writing or Math). Of the ten students believed to be struggling with Reading, two students were participating in the Empower Reading Program, both in the same Grade 6 class in a high-SES school. Their teacher reported that they were both making impressive progress.

[Student A]'s made, like, really good strides going through Empower.... [Student B's] having a good year. Parents say she's having a good year. From my perspective, she seems happy in class.... She feels good about the progress she's making. She comes back from Empower smiling because, you know, she was able to read a new word today, that kind of thing. (Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher)

The other eight students struggling in Reading were not accessing Empower (or any other Tier 2 or 3 reading intervention). Two students were considered too young (Kindergarten, Grade 1) and were being given more time to progress with Tier 1 strategies.⁹³ One student (Grade 2) was in a school that did not offer any withdrawal programs, only push-in supports, which could not facilitate a structured literacy program like Empower. Another student (Grade 3) was in a school that had previously offered Empower in both the primary and junior divisions, but the new principal changed the primary resource model from withdrawal to push-in. The shift meant that the student would have to wait another year until Grade 4 to be able to access the structured intervention program.

She would have been a perfect candidate. The only reason she didn't get a placement there is because... our principal last year decided there wasn't going to be.... Empower in primary... I don't know the reasons behind it... And that was just unfortunate. I don't know. I just wish they had it. Yeah, so I think, from my understanding is she's a candidate for next year. (Sophia, Grade 3 Teacher)

In these cases, allocations and ideologies produced a structural limitation (i.e., resource models) that prevented access to intervention.

The four remaining students did not qualify for the Empower program because they did not fit the target profile. Even though Empower has been shown to be effective for students with a wide range of IQs, students with stronger vocabulary and visual memory scores tend to make

⁹³ The 2023 Language curriculum was released shortly after these interviews took place. These young students would hopefully start receiving phonics-based instruction based on the Ontario curriculum in their following school year (Grades 1 and 2 respectively).

greater continued growth within the program (Lovett et al., 2017). Furthermore, as several participants in this study explained, given that the program is delivered in 45–60-minute sessions, students with longer attention spans are more likely to be successful. This is not to suggest that students with other profiles would not benefit from the program—many likely would. However, in contexts of limited supply, schools must prioritize students who are most likely to make the fastest, most substantial gains—students who will create the highest “return on investment.” In this sense, access to intervention is entangled with neo-liberal logics of efficiency, productivity, and the valuing of the more able students over others.

Drawing from the work of Gillborn and Youdell on the *A-C economy*, Ball and colleagues (2012) argue,

a focus on some students, as strategically productive, means the relative but systematic neglect of others and patterns of uneven access to expenditures and efforts at school, with the effect of producing a structured distribution of identities and opportunities and exclusions based on ethnicity, social class and gender [and ability!]. However, currently the ‘culture’ of performance draws attention to the ‘improvement’ of almost all students, none can be neglected entirely, but some ‘improvements’ are more strategically important than others. (p. 81)

Interestingly, Ball and colleagues omit ability from their list of exclusions, which may partly explain their belief that no student can be neglected entirely. From a DSE perspective, this has been far from true. Drawing from Vandekinderen and colleagues’ concept of the *abandoned citizen*, Goodley (2014) describes the ways in which disabled “citizens are abandoned and cast off if they fail to meet the neoliberal imperative” (p. 31). He writes:

the only successful person is a socially productive one measured in terms of ‘value for money, flexibility and, of course, the proverbial performance rating’ ... In the cold light of day, many of us... fail to match up to this impossible ideal of personhood. (Goodley, 2014, p. 32)

As neoliberalism justifies the abandonment of disabled citizens in society at large, so too do education systems structured around the same *neoliberal imperatives* (Slee, 2013). The triaging of students for essential interventions along the lines of ability within a so-called “inclusive education system” exemplifies how “neoliberalism makes the body...a key site of investment for the state” (Goodley, 2014, p. 29), and, in doing so, absolves education systems from their “responsibility for the disablement of people with a range of challenging differences” (Slee, p. 903).

One teacher explained that her student with ADHD was not selected for the intervention because of difficulty focusing for the duration of the sessions:

Um, a lot of it was behavioural issues. Like he would have a hard time sitting and attending. Um, so he wasn't chosen this year, unfortunately. (Lina, Grade 3/4 Teacher)

Two other students identified with MID were not chosen because they likely would not have progress as quickly as other students in need of the program. The teacher of the first student (who is also the resource teacher in the school), shared that although her student did not qualify for the program, she was able to provide simplified phonics-based instruction to him and six other students not selected for Empower through during other resource withdrawal periods.

Sarah, Grade 4/Resource Teacher: I do do Empower, um, but his memory is so not there that they suggested that he not be a part of it when I brought his name forward and asked for some help picking students.

Interviewer: The Empower consultants? He's not a great candidate for the program?

Sarah, Grade 4/Resource Teacher: Yes, right.

Interviewer: Do you agree or disagree?

Sarah, Grade 4/Resource Teacher: Uh, it's my first year teaching Empower, so I don't really know the answer to that yet. I do see great success in some other students with the program but considering how long it took us to get, like, M is the-the first letter in your name and it makes that Mm sound-- like that took us such a large amount of time, he wouldn't be able to keep up with the fast pace of the Empower program...

Interviewer: So-so what do you do for other students? Run like in-- a-a gap closing program for him? Is it mostly one-on-one?

Sarah, Grade 4/Resource Teacher: So, I have six students with him, all working on letter sounds and decoding: two Grade 5s, two Grade 4s, and two Grade 2s.... They weren't chosen for Empower.

The teacher of the second student with MID explained,

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: I don't think he was considered because of his MID, um, designation or diagnosis. Um, I'm trying to recall. I'm pretty sure he was not. Um, I think, and I hate to say this simply because of what we saw in terms of ability to progress, um, and Empower is very, uh, prescribed. Um, it's an hour and because of his ADHD as well, it would be a challenge for him to be to attend for the hour lesson. And from what I understand, for Empower, they want the students have no behavior issues, no attention issues, ones who could really show progression or achievement in the end. And like out of all our needs, I believe she could only select, is it six or eight? um, for the whole school year.

Interviewer: Six or eight students for the full school year? How many kids in the school do you think would benefit from it?...

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: Definitely within Grade 3 alone-- we have four Grade 3 classrooms-- um, over a dozen [students] for sure.

When decisions regarding who will access an evidence-based intervention and who will not are stratified along the lines of perceived ability or potential, and mediated through neoliberal agendas of efficiency, productivity, and worth, can the Board's approach to supporting students in mainstream classrooms really be called inclusion?

While some students were not selected for being too far below the selection thresholds, some were not selected because they were too far above it. A teacher described how one of her students was not selected because he, though significantly below grade-level in reading, was too advanced based on his DRA score. She reported that they were looking for students in Grade 3 who were performing below a DRA level 10 and since he was at a level 10, he did not qualify.

Interviewer: Was he considered for Empower?

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: Was he considered? No, he was not low enough to be considered, so he was actually the one who was, um, too high, um, but low in terms of grade-level... I believe the cutoff for Empower they were looking for was under 10... He was definitely a 10. And I think many of the Empower students were like at four or two, so that's why he didn't make it. And the teacher could only take a set number of students. So he was, you know, the one falling through the cracks. And I sort of, uh, begged and pleaded, "Please, he needs some support." Um, she took him on because she had an opening. So, he's with a small group, um, and it's basically just building his phonics foundation, like sounds and words. Um, and it shows. It shows. Like, the one-on-one support that he receives there, I know is not something that I can always achieve in the classroom.

While some students not selected for Empower were able to receive alternative interventions from the resource teacher during other periods of the day, this was not consistent across schools. Further research is needed to better understand how decisions about access to interventions are made and how they affect students who are not included in structured, evidence-based programs.

This section does not intend to suggest that Empower should not be used in schools—quite the contrary. Rather, it highlights the need for sufficient resources to ensure that all students who need Tier 2 or Tier 3 strategies (whether through expanded Empower access, or with other evidence-based programs) can receive the support they need.

Progress as the Kiss of Death for Accessing Intervention

While targeted intervention programs can lead to meaningful academic gains for students, progress can come with unintended consequences. Two teachers were facing challenging dilemmas after their students had made significant progress within their resource support programs. In the first case, a Grade 3 teacher explained that her student had made exciting progress in Reading due to her in-class support and the withdrawal support offered by the resource teacher. He had progressed from a DRA Level 8 (often expected in early Grade 1) to a Level 24 (often expected by mid-Grade 2) (see Chapter 6). Though still far from the Level 38 (often expected by the end of Grade 3), the student was making impressive gains. Unfortunately, that left the teacher in a difficult position. As per the Board's resource support policy outlined in the special education plan, in order to continue accessing resource support in the following school year (Grade 4), the student would need an IEP:

The [Board]'s position is that students who are not exceptional are entitled to receive resource support for one reporting period (or term) without the development of an IEP. If the recommendation of the IST or SST is for continued support beyond one reporting period, then an IEP should be developed. (Toronto District School Board, 2024b, p. 158)

Unfortunately, as the teacher explained, this policy collided with the recent introduction of the *2-12 IEP Review* policy that suggests the elimination of Accommodation-only IEPs (Chapter 4). The intersection of these two policies produced a serious dilemma for the teacher: the only way for her student to continue accessing the resource support that was so clearly working for him, was by initiating an “inappropriate” Modified IEP. Layering in the additional forces of the conflicting OCT ethical standards of integrity and care (see Chapter 7), and the planned additional reductions to resource teacher allocations for the following school year (see sections above), the teacher truly faced a proper dilemmatic soup (Chapter 7):

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: Um, and I don't know if this is the case with other schools, but if a student is receiving resource support, they cannot be without an IEP for more than a term. So, I do have a student that's coming up that has had resource support for more than a term. And so he needs to be reassessed as to whether an IEP is what's next in store for him.

Interviewer: Do you feel like that would be a Modified IEP or an Accommodated-only IEP?

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: Well, we are told we can no longer do an Accommodated IEP. Apparently, Accommodated IEPs are no longer acceptable because apparently, teachers constantly do accommodations in class, which we do. So that's just, what do they

call it? Um, “good teaching practice,” or something like that. So, our school this year is no longer doing Accommodated IEPs.

Interviewer: Right. So, if he is to stay with the resource withdrawal program, he needs to have a Modified IEP?

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: That is the understanding that I got, yes... Here's the other thing, my understanding is, a [Modified] IEP is for a student who is two years behind grade-level and this student is not. So, I don't know if that will result in a Modified IEP, but what I'm told is next year, he will not get resource support.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. I've been wondering about these clashing policies myself. [chuckles]. Okay, but you're the first participant I've met who's actually facing an IEP decision based on these policies. So, let's see, um, do-do you feel like he needs modifications?

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: No. I think he could get by on accommodations, but again, I'm not allowed, for whatever reason, to make an Accommodated IEP any longer. In the past I have. This is the first year where we were told no more Accommodations, just Modified. Which led me to the question of, well, why is there an accommodated and a modified option on the IEP?

Interviewer: And do you think there will be any wiggle room in the resource withdrawal for more than one term policy without an IEP?

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: For next school year? No, only because our spec ed allocation was reduced by a 1.0 and there are much more needier students in our school.

In a second case, a Grade 6 student was making tremendous progress in the Empower Reading program and was feeling very positive about her progress. The following year she would be transferring to a busy middle school where structured intervention programs were not provided. Determined to set up an arrangement where the student could continue to access support that was helping, the teacher explained that they were pursuing a placement in a self-contained special education class for students with learning disabilities for the following year.⁹⁴ They were therefore hesitant to re-assess her current level of performance because too much progress would jeopardize her placement the program they were seeking.

We're trying to get into her a [learning disability self-contained class] placement next year and we're kind of like, okay, let's not-- we're not gonna [update the] assessment until after we do our IPRC because we don't want her to be too high for her placement next year... You have to be three [grade] levels behind in both Language and in Math, and if

⁹⁴ Whether or not a placement in a self-contained special education class would actually result in effective instruction and maintain her progress is debatable given the inconsistent efficacy of self-contained programs (K. Barron, Collis, et al., 2024), yet that was the intent of the teacher and the student's parents, nonetheless.

you're not three levels behind in Language and Math, then you don't get- you don't get the placement. And then you're- you're on a Modified IEP in a regular classroom. And for some students, that's fine, but I think for [this student], she needs the support of, you know, an extra adult in the room or a smaller class size. (Matthew, Grade 6 Teacher)

Interestingly, this teacher recognized the distinction between a Modified IEP in a regular class for the purpose of inclusion without concentrated efforts to advance the student, and a Modified IEP for the purpose of mapping a scaffolded intervention (Chapter 8). He strongly believed in this student's potential to learn and wanted her to continue to have access to gap-closing opportunities rather than advance with a Modified IEP indefinitely.

In both of these cases, students were making impressive gains because of the combined efforts of their classroom teachers and the resource teachers (one through Empower, and one through a teacher-designed withdrawal program). In both of these cases, the students' progress (in its entanglement with policies, allocations, and all of the other forces in the apparatus) put their future access to supplementary instructional support (real or perceived) in jeopardy.

Modification as the Only Option

The *Apparatus of Intervention Provision* and scarcity of intervention, as illustrated above, often produces circumstances where modifying the curriculum becomes the only viable option, regardless of whether it truly reflects the student's potential to achieve expectations at grade level. Two SSELs described this unfortunate reality:

Grace, SSEL: But I also think-- I-I do think that some of the modifications-- and this sounds really terrible-- are less about what the child could actually attain, it's more about what they can attain given the resources that we have.

Jane, SSEL: Yep. Well said. Perfectly said.

Grace, SSEL: And I think it's terrible. Like, I really do.

Jane, SSEL: Same here.

Grace, SSEL: And I think if I was a parent, I would be very unhappy to hear that.

Jane, SSEL: Yeah.

Grace, SSEL: But I think it's the truth. And I don't know if teachers, SSELs, spec ed consultants, I don't know if everyone is doing it intentionally or we just know-- we know the landscape. But I know every single day my kids could do more. I could push them further, harder, and I could double the number of expectations on their IEPs, but I just can't get to them.

Jane, SSEL: Yes!

Grace, SSEL: Can't get to them in the classroom. I can't get to them in a five-day cycle.

Jane, SSEL: Yes!

Grace, SSEL: So--

Jane, SSEL: And-and-and-and-and sometimes you're pulled as a supply teacher so that there's the lack of consistency. So, there's, you know, it's—

Grace, SSEL: Exactly...

Jane, SSEL: There's so many things going on in a day. Yeah. And you try your best.

This reality has implications for the three distinct understandings of Modified IEPs outlined in Chapter 8. First, when educators are unable to provide the kind of targeted instruction required to prevent a student from failing a particular grade level (i.e., to catch 'em before they fall), the student's failure intra-acts with the absence of policies regarding what to do with failing students, *producing* the conception that Modified IEPs are for the purpose of facilitating grade-retention within a context of social promotion (Chapter 8). The system's inability to provide adequate instruction becomes effectively camouflaged as the special education/disabled students' inability to learn, thereby obfuscating its role in producing education inequities and the ongoing underserving of students who might have otherwise succeeded with appropriate support.

Regarding the conception of Modified IEPs as maps for intervention plans (Chapter 8), the combined limitations of classroom instruction and school-based interventions can make fulfillment of that purpose impossible. One SSEL explained how this resulted in students getting stuck.

I think that's some of the issue. There's gonna be gaps created. Or they get stuck in a grade too long [that] they don't need to be [in]. And they're not really getting taught the things they need to in order to help them progress... the teacher's just getting the paperwork done and then it's like that's enough... they're getting stuck and maybe and lost in a shuffle sometimes (Lucas, SSEL).

The significant barriers to prevent a student from failing, or to bring a student up to grade-level performance means that all that can realistically be offered to students performing below grade-level is an opportunity to be included with their same-aged peers—the third conception of Modified IEPs.

People often believe that special education means that students actually receive something that is "special"—additional support, additional instruction, or additional resources tailored to their needs. While this is sometimes the case, many students with curriculum modifications are not able to access any targeted instruction programs. For these students, the only thing they "receive" is lowered expectations. In effect, for many students, Modified IEPs are a systemically justified lack of support. This raises a critical question: *What, in practice, does special education truly provide?*

Taken together, this section paints a picture of a system stretched beyond capacity, resulting in a policy rhetoric of inclusive education, but a policy reality of mere integration. The effects of this key difference that makes a difference are explored below.

9.3 – The Effects of the Discrepancy Between Policy Rhetoric and Policy Reality

Delineating the discrepancies between policy rhetoric and policy reality has long been an interest of critical policy scholars (Ball et al., 2012; Diem et al., 2014; Welch, 1998; Winton, 2013). In thinking with Barad, such discrepancies are likely key differences that make a difference and therefore a fertile site for diffractive analysis (Barad, 2007). In this section, I begin to explore some of the effects produced by the discrepancies between the Board's policy rhetoric of inclusion and its policy reality of integration, as illustrated above. Three distinct effects emerged through this analysis, each offering avenues for further research.

Stratified Access to Instruction and the Privatization of Special Education

Throughout this study there was evidence to suggest that access to intervention was stratified along the lines of social identities both within and across schools. Within schools, educators were forced to triage students for intervention based on learning profile, diagnosis, or perceived potential. Across schools, participants suggested that socio-economic status of the school's community influenced access to supplementary instructional support by shaping the supply and demand for IEPs, IST/SST processes, and resource support.

Some SSEs in schools in a high-SES communities described how many of their families, when faced with the reality that their child will not receive adequate instruction in the local school, sought special education interventions (e.g., Orton Gillingham, Reading Mastery) outside of school—often at an expense of tens of thousands of dollars a year. One SSE recognized this as an equity issue:

If you're gonna take away [self-contained] programs... then you need to rethink how we are taking care of these students that are in the inclusion model. Right? Because to me, [the absence of targeted instruction] is also oppressive because the students that get access are the parents that have the money and the knowledge to provide it outside of school hours. Well, that's not fair for the families that don't have the extra funds. Right? So, uh, you know, there definitely needs to be a more systematic approach to how all schools [access support] regardless of where you fall on that socioeconomic grid... I am getting discouraged by what I see in terms of privilege and how that impacts students. (Jane, SSEL)

Consequently, this privatization of targeted instruction reduces the reliance on in-school supports within affluent communities. This, in turn eases the pressure on in-school supports thereby increasing their ability to provide access to more students with the same limited resources as other schools. This, then *produces* a filtered image of a “good school”—schools with few struggling students, which further distorts the images of schools in low SES neighbourhoods and fuels deficit narratives of “bad schools,” “bad teachers,” “bad students,” and “bad communities.” Furthermore, with the common hegemonic positioning of the white “middle-class” school as a “norm,” artificially reduced demand for resource support (probably indicated by EQAO performance) disguises the real extent of the need, thereby alleviating the government from adequately funding the system. Consequently, students in less affluent communities, who depend entirely on publicly funded supports, are more likely to face triaged access to instruction or be placed on Modified IEPs in the absence of instructional alternatives—a feedback loop that sustains the reproduction of social inequities.

The Emotional Cost of Failing to Perform “The Good, Inclusive Teacher”

Several teachers, sometimes in tears, described feeling as though they had let their student down; that they had failed to “do right” by the child. This feeling of failure—the disappointment of not meeting the expectations of “the good, inclusive teacher”—was clearly taking an emotional toll on these participants. This observation is consistent with other academic literature investigating teacher discourses and the pressures they place on teachers to live up to their impossible standards (Ball, 2003; Bibby, 2010; Britzman, 2011; Marom, 2018; Moore, 2004). In his book, *Education – An ‘Impossible Profession’?* Bibby (2010) explains that,

The experience of the impossibility of policy ideals and the sheer hard work of finding ways of living within them has been the focus of several studies... all of which testify to the psychic and social costs that new identities levy. When symbolic representation – the descriptive labels we might want to attach to ‘good’ teaching degenerates into ‘symbolic equation’, the role of the teacher becomes impossible and persecuting.... In this kind of

situation, a recognition that ‘the idealised role of the teacher has failed’ slides and becomes ‘I have failed (to be an ideal teacher)’ – a slippage in symbolisation that brings potentially heavy personal costs. (p. 139)

Such emotional costs were apparent in the tears of several participants. Their tearful comments also made me wonder if the emotional costs of underserving students might also be apparent in patterns of teacher attrition—a potential area for future research. In the present study, one beginning teacher in a challenging kindergarten class shared that she was not sure that she would be able to finish the school year.

I-I-- this is like the first time where I don't know what more can be done for him.... I don't know. I don't- I don't have the answer. It seems every expert who walks in through the door never gives you an answer anymore. All they keep saying is, do what you're doing. Try your best. Basically, survive the next three months... Everybody I talk to is like burned out and saying, "I just need more help." It sucks. (Laila, Kindergarten Teacher)

Another teacher, this time highly experienced, expressed her fear that she might not be able to stay in the profession until retirement:

Like again, this whole “inclusion” [read integration] has its challenges, but you know, it doesn't have to be so challenging if the correct supports were put in... I fear where our education system is going and what my teaching career will look like, you know, five years down the line, 10 years down the line. I have 12 years to go. Like, it's still gonna be a while. And I-I often question, "Will I make it to the end?" That's the scary part... I wanna make it to the end. But it's like you'd think after 17 years it gets easier, it doesn't. (Selena, Grade 3 Teacher)

The impossibility of being an inclusive teacher in a system that does not support its actualization—a system that simultaneously insists on the moral imperative of being the “good, inclusive teacher”—carries a profound emotional cost. As Bibby (2010) writes, “the terrible price of their need to care at all costs is... the loss of a piece of their soul” (p. 144). If that is not enough, these participant accounts also suggest that such experiences may be a force in an apparatus of teacher attrition—a growing issue in Ontario education (Hibbert & Dean, 2025).

Antagonizing Consequences for the Inclusive Education Movement

If inclusion—as defined as meeting the social/academic needs of all pupils in need of additional support (Nilholm & Goransson, 2017)—is the policy, then it cannot succeed on vision alone. It requires a sustained investment in sufficient staffing for the provision of instructional support through both push-in support and withdrawal models. Without this investment, the promise of inclusion is an impossibility.

When the practice of integration is labeled by systems of as inclusion, participants in the system construct their understanding of it, not in line with the ideology (the policy rhetoric), but rather with how they experience it (the policy reality). Then, the false representation of inclusion—its identity thief—conjures antagonistic sentiments that fuel the polarized arguments against inclusive education. Statements like “inclusion doesn’t work” are prolific and threaten to undermine the entire ideological movement. As one teacher stated,

I'm not a huge fan of saying, ‘Okay, your-your kid needs to be in an LD class or whatever.’ I don't think that works for most kids. But, you know, now we've basically thrown out the support, and so ‘inclusion’ is, you know, [pause] abandonment. Basically, it's like, "Good luck, kid." That's why we say, ‘inclusion without support is abandonment.’ (Barbara, Grade 5/6 Teacher)

Even worse, it is systemic abandonment disguised as equity and enacted in the name of inclusion.

To be clear, this is not to say that Board leaders are actively withholding supports. As Barbara put it, “they've got nothing” (Barbara, Grade 5/6 Teacher). The Board is severely constrained by a government that has inflicted devastating cuts to the public education system. According to a report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives,

[The Board] funding has decreased by \$400 per student for the 2025-26 school year compared to what the board received in 2018-19, adjusted for inflation. The budget gap for the upcoming school year is \$106.7 million, compared to what the board would have received had 2018-19 funding kept pace with inflation and enrolment. The cumulative funding gap over the past seven years is \$898.2 million. (Tranjan, 2025)

These fiscal constraints render the inclusive education imaginary impossible to sustain, which begs the question: should we still be referring to this policy rhetoric as “inclusion”?

Concluding Thoughts

The analysis presented in this chapter adds several new forces to the curriculum modification ecology. The *Apparatus of Intervention Provision* and scarcity is produced by several material-discursive forces, including (but certainly not limited to) colliding policies, staffing structures, competing discourses of inclusion, and neoliberal logics of efficiency. These forces produce several effects, including abandoned students, stratified educational outcomes, and a feedback loop that sustains and reproduces inequities. Teachers who navigate the impossibility of performing the “good, inclusive teacher” pay an emotional price, and the reputation of the inclusive education movement is tarnished by the imposter of integration.

Within the broader ecology of curriculum modification, it becomes clear that intervention scarcity is not a discrete phenomenon, but an agential force that reshapes relations among teachers, students, and communities, and even redefines what counts as “support,” “inclusion,” and “abandonment.”

Chapter 10: Results and Discussion

Pursuit, Refusal, and the Apparatus of Opportunity Hoarding

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy. (Dewey, 1915, p. 3)

While it is indisputable that families from *all* communities care deeply about their children's success in school, clear demographic patterns of how *some* families—often those in predominantly white, high-SES neighbourhoods—aggressively intervened to leverage educational entitlements for their children, emerged in both the quantitative and qualitative analyses of this project. In many ways, this final results and discussion chapter is a culmination of all the preceding chapters as I trace how many of the forces/apparatuses in the curriculum modification ecosystem⁹⁵ converge to produce a phenomenon that sociologist James Tilly calls *opportunity hoarding* (Tilly, 1998).

Opportunity hoarding is a phenomenon where privileged social groups secure valuable resources for themselves while the access for others is restricted (Tilly, 1998). Several long-standing equity issues in education are now being named as situations of opportunity hoarding. As Posey-Maddox and colleagues (2025) explain,

The concept of opportunity hoarding has been used by a growing number of education researchers and sociologists of education in recent years to describe the process through which relatively advantaged families (largely described in the literature as white and/or middle- or upper-middle class) secure and/or maintain scarce educational resources that favor their children at the expense of low-income and/or racially minoritized young people and their families. (p. 2)

Diamond and Lewis (2022) demonstrated how privileged white families intervened to ensure the best course placements for their children while blocking the de-streaming policies that would equalize the access of others to those programs. They also demonstrated how privileged families interfered in school discipline procedures to exempt their own children from the zero tolerance

⁹⁵ In other chapters, I focused primarily on the curriculum modification ecosystem. In this chapter I zoom out to the broader IEP ecosystem because the types of IEPs are both relevant to the topic of opportunity hoarding. It should also be noted that from a Baradian perspective, these are not two separate “ecosystems” but rather one reality where forces are constantly reconfiguring to produce effects. Modified IEPs are therefore somewhat inseparable for all others.

policies that negatively impacted other students in the school. Posey-Maddox and colleagues (2025) apply the concept of opportunity hoarding to school choice policies and how privileged white families often supplemented school budgets to ensure their children received the best possible education. Powell (2020) explored how advantaged parents leveraged credit recovery programs to benefit their already successful students, thereby restricting access of those in need. Finally, in the context of special education, Voulgarides (2018) demonstrated how the requirement for parental involvement in special education decisions legislated through the U.S.'s Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), resulted in some privileged families occupying resources and personnel with excessive demands that ultimately reduced their availability for other students. In this chapter, I argue that the strategic pursuit of IEPs (Accommodation-only and Modified) and other special education services by predominantly white, middle- and upper-middle class families in the Board is another classic example of opportunity hoarding.

It is important to note that the phenomenon of opportunity hoarding does not necessarily involve intent—it is produced through systems that include, but are not reducible to, the actions of individuals (Posey-Maddox et al., 2025; Tilly, 1998). As Lewis and Diamond (2015) observe,

Of course, most white parents... see themselves as personally and organizationally advocating for their own kids. Some do not even need to do much advocating on behalf of their kids—as one of them put it, ‘the system just works.’ (p. 153)

As a systemic phenomenon, an agential realism approach offers a powerful lens for understanding opportunity hoarding. From a Baradian perspective, opportunity hoarding can be understood as an effect produced by the entanglement of human and nonhuman material-discursive forces that collectively shape who benefits and who is excluded from the protection of IEPs without conscious design. In this chapter, I trace how many of the forces described in earlier chapters intra-act to produce the phenomenon of opportunity hoarding. Key forces include, but are not limited to: the duality of disability/IEPs (Artiles et al., 2016), monolithic discourses of IEP harm or protection (Chapter 4), the paradox of education equity (Artiles, 2003), the hauntings of eugenics and special education as a mechanism of systemic oppression, report card grades (Chapters 5 and 6) and families’ responses to them (Chapters 7 and 10), the Board’s IEP policies, the DI and UDL practices of “the good teacher” (Chapter 7), private/public access to assessments and interventions (Chapter 9), shifting definitions of disability, access to accommodations, parental advocacy and patterns of resistance and concession, the when-to-

modify policy vacuum (Chapter 5), anti-racism/anti-oppression work in the Board, and special education gatekeeping rooted in racist ideologies.

An agonistic stance is especially important in this chapter as applying the concept of opportunity hoarding to special education is somewhat related to a decades-old and highly contentious disproportionality debate. The very premise of opportunity hoarding—that minoritized groups are excluded from an opportunity—is somewhat similar to scholarship demonstrating *under*-representation. This scholarship has sometimes been interpreted through racist ideologies (see Morgan et al., 2015), resulting in significant policy and political ramifications, particularly in the American context. To be clear, unlike this particular subset of the *under*-representation research, I am not arguing that marginalized students currently excluded from special education should be included in this “opportunity.” Rather, in this chapter, I argue that oversimplified, binary understandings of disproportionality issues have resulted in remedies that may exacerbate inequities. To make this argument, I begin by deconstructing some of the underlying logics of the disproportionality debate that relate to the concept of opportunity hoarding (Section 10.1). Then, I present the forces that produce opportunity seeking among privileged families in the Board (Section 10.2). Then, I trace the forces that exclude other groups—for better or for worse—from these same opportunities (Section 10.3). And finally, I describe how mapping this apparatus illuminates significant issues for both disproportionality research, and equity and anti-oppression work in the Board (Section 10.4).

10.1 – The Polarizing Forces of Disproportionality Debates

The issue of disproportionality—the over or under-representation of a group in an educational category in comparison with the groups’ proportion in the overall population (Voulgarides et al., 2017)—has been an area of concern for critical special education scholars since at least the 1960s (Artiles et al., 2010; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Dunn, 1968; Sullivan & Proctor, 2016; Waitoller et al., 2010). Yet, as disproportionality expert Alfredo Artiles (2019) writes, “mixed findings with blurry theorizing plague this literature” (p. 328), which often results in oversimplified, polarized arguments based on claims of binary opposite truths (Fish et al., 2024; Skiba et al., 2016).

Debates in the disproportionality literature are often situated along two intersecting axes: one of *over* and *under*-representation, and the other of special education being either *protective* or *harmful*. For those who believe special education to be predominantly protective, the *under*-

representation of minoritized students is understood as an equity problem, often resulting in “calls to direct more children of color into special education” (Sullivan & Proctor, 2016, p. 782). For those who believe special education to be predominantly marginalizing, the *over*-representation of minoritized students is understood as the equity problem (Skiba et al., 2016; Voulgarides et al., 2017; Waitoller et al., 2010), resulting in calls to *reduce* the involvement of minoritized students in special education (Sullivan & Proctor, 2016).

Over the past five decades, most of the disproportionality literature, which is predominantly situated in the United States, has focused on the problematic over-representation of historically marginalized students in special education (Voulgarides et al., 2017; Waitoller et al., 2010), though many critical authors have made brief references to how under-representation can also be problematic (Artiles, 2019; Fish, 2022; Skiba et al., 2016). In the U.S., this important body of literature was instrumental in shaping IDEA’s requirement for states to monitor and respond to “significant disproportionality” in identification, placement, or discipline practices in their schools (Tefera et al., 2023; Voulgarides et al., 2017; Waitoller et al., 2010). The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights—a coalition of over 240 national civil rights organizations in the United States—has described this legislation as key to achieving the goal “that all students with disabilities, without regard to race, are correctly identified, placed in appropriate educational settings, and not subject to inappropriate student discipline” (The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, 2025).

However, in 2015, Morgan and colleagues published a highly antagonizing study claiming that there was no national evidence of the *over*-representation of linguistic, racial, or cultural minority students in five common disability categories (learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, intellectual disabilities, health impairments and emotional disturbances), and that they were, in fact, *under*-represented in special education as compared to white, English-speaking students of similar profiles. Based on a highly criticized methodology (Fish et al., 2024; Skiba et al., 2016), and deficit ideologies of children and families (Collins et al., 2016), they made two contentious claims: first, that “characterizations of special education as ‘discriminatory’, maintaining ‘a new legalized form of structural segregation and racism’, and constituting ‘institutionalized racism’”(Morgan et al., 2015, p. 287) were wholly unfounded, and therefore the requirement for states to monitor and respond to disproportionality was unnecessary (Morgan, 2015; Morgan et al., 2015). This research was widely touted by the Trump

administration who used it to justify their attempt to delay the requirement for states to track and remedy disproportionality in 2019 (Green, 2019), and remove it completely in 2025⁹⁶ (The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, 2025).

Towards a More Dialectical and Agonistic Understanding of Disproportionality

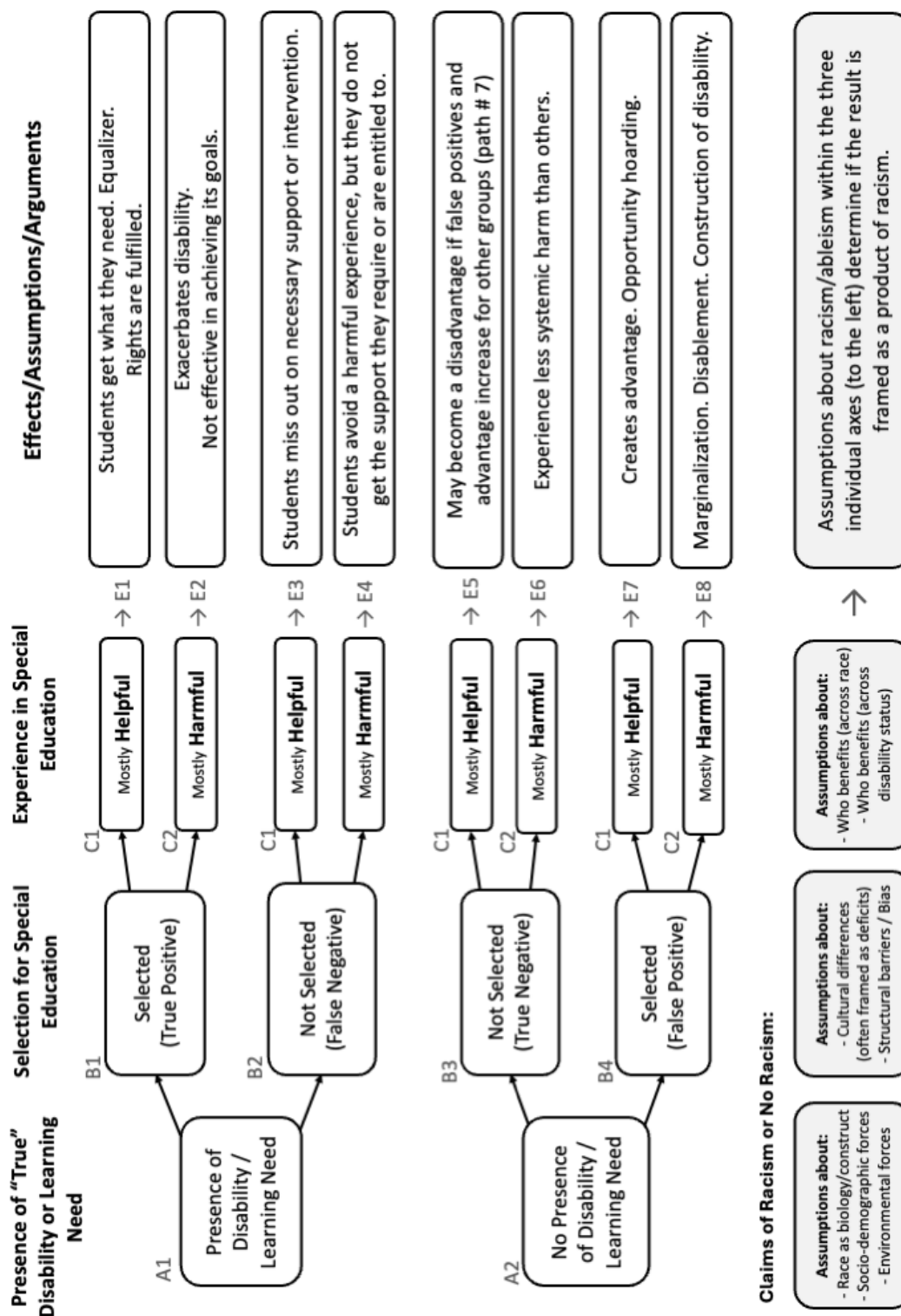
The disproportionality literature is rife with polarized, antagonistic debates that reflect several entrenched binary assumptions. Scholars often position their arguments as singular truths, resulting in stalemates between opposing poles—whether data shows *under* versus *over* representation, whether disproportionality is produced by *poverty* or by *racism in schools*, and whether special education is *harmful* or *helpful*. Entangled with this last debate are additional underlying assumptions of who benefits from special education: students *with disabilities* but not students *without disabilities* whose underperformance can be explained by other factors; or *racially, ethnically, socio-economically and linguistically privileged* students but not *minoritized* students. These dichotomies create a polarized field in which oversimplified assumptions sabotage productive dialogue and hinder the development of effective remedies. Despite decades of calls from scholars to approach the problem of disproportionality with an appreciation for its complexity (Artiles, 2003; Skiba et al., 2016) and recognition that patterns of over/under representation will vary from context to context (Cruz & Rodl, 2018), many publications continue to aggregate multiple contexts into a single result (see Morgan et al., 2017).

In my attempt to make sense of the contradictory arguments in disproportionality literature, I sketched a visual representation of the entangled logics (Figure 10.1).

⁹⁶ As of the time of writing this second draft (October 2025), a proposal to remove the requirement for states to monitor significant disproportionality has been submitted to the U.S. Department of Education and was under review. The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights submitted a formal comment urging the Department to retain the requirement (The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, 2025).

Figure 10.1

An Agonistic Matrix for Understanding Disproportionality Arguments



The first axis (column A) involves assumptions of whether there is a “true” presence of disability/learning need.⁹⁷ Fundamental to this axis are debates about what causes disability and learning needs—impairment, poverty, and/or discrimination. This debate occupies a considerable amount of space in the literature (American Educational Research Association, 2016; Waitoller et al., 2010). In Ontario, and particularly in the Board, where IEPs are not contingent on a diagnosis of disability, there is considerable focus on discerning whether a student’s academic underperformance is caused by disability or the result of other factors of disadvantage. This was evident in the comments of several participants, including a vice-principal in a low SES school who shared:

So, we're pushing back on accommodated IEPs through offering PD and lunch-and-learns around pedagogy, but then we're also trying to ensure that our Modified IEPs are based on an exceptionality and not just those other factors that I've shared. (Victor, Administrator)

The task of separating which difficulties are the result of disability and which stem from broader social disadvantage or discrimination may, in fact, be impossible, especially given the contested and fluid definitions of disability itself.⁹⁸

The second axis (column B) centers on arguments of whether the student was selected or not selected for involvement in special education. This axis intra-acts with the first axis—assumptions regarding a true presence of disability/learning need—and produces four possible effects: a student *with* a true disability/learning need is “correctly” selected (a true positive⁹⁹), a student *with* a true disability/learning need is not selected (a false negative), a student *without* a true disability/learning need is *correctly not selected* (a true negative), and a student *without* a true disability/learning need is *incorrectly selected* (a false positive). Much of the polarization in

⁹⁷ In the U.S. context, where much of the disproportionality literature originates, involvement with special education is intended to only be for students institutionally identified with disability. This differs from the Ontario context where students may be involved with special education without institutional identification, and in practice, often without a medical or clinical diagnosis of disability (Chapter 3). In this Chapter, I therefore use “disability/learning need” to acknowledge both contexts.

⁹⁸ See also Puar (2017) for a discussion on debility.

⁹⁹ Although scientific terms like “false positive” and “true negative” are common in disproportionality literature (Skiba et al., 2016; Sullivan & Proctor, 2016) and statistical analysis more broadly, their use in disability context may inadvertently reproduce medicalized orientations to disability. I therefore favour the use of “correct” and “incorrect” selection (in reference to alignment with the policy context), but include terms like “false positive” in parentheses for clarity.

disproportionality literature concentrates around the tension between “false positives” and “false negatives” (Sullivan & Proctor, 2016).

There is an important contextual distinction to be made on this axis: In contexts where special education involvement is dependent on a disability identification (i.e., U.S. contexts where much of the disproportionality literature is produced), the emphasis of the conversation on “correct” or “incorrect” selection is based on whether or not there is a true presence of disability. In this present study, however, I emphasize a different aspect of “correct” and “incorrect” selection—the subjective determinations of whether or not a student is actually having academic difficulty (Chapters 5 and 6).

The third axis (column C) centers on monolithic arguments that special education is either helpful or harmful. When Artiles, Dorn and Bal (2016) presented the idea that disability can offer both protection *and* marginalization, it was framed as a duality—contradicting but *coexisting* forces. However, in many publications, this duality is often applied as a dichotomy—mutually exclusive and opposing categories that get assigned to groups of students based on their social identities. Sometimes this dichotomy is assigned along the lines of disability status, assuming that special education is beneficial for disabled students but harmful for non-disabled students (Sullivan & Proctor, 2016)—a position that is contested by many critical disabilities and DSE scholars (Brantlinger, 2005). Sometimes this dichotomy is divided along the lines of racial and socioeconomic privilege, assuming that special education is harmful for racialized/classed students but protective for privileged students (Artiles, 2003)—an assumption that has guided the formation of the *K-1 IEP Strategy* and *2-12 IEP Review* policies (Salmon, et al., 2023).

Regardless of whether those engaging with issues of disproportionality (i.e., policy makers, researchers, participants) are aware, underlying assumptions along these three axes interact to produce eight different understandings of the experiences commonly described in disproportionality debates (column E). Mapping these experiences onto the matrix in Figure 10.1 helps facilitate dialectical understandings of the issues by creating a physical space where multiple realities can be held in tension. Here, it becomes possible for special education to simultaneously produce equity (E1 in Figure 10.1) and marginalization (E2, E3, E4, E5, E7, E8 in Figure 10.1).

To add an additional layer of complexity to the matrix, common claims in disproportionality literature that a particular experience is *produced by* or is *evidence of* racism

depends on the additional assumptions embedded within each of the three axes. These assumptions—broadly outlined in the grey boxes at the bottom of Figure 10.1—relate to how race, ability, culture, and benefits are conceptualized. Their inclusion in this analytic matrix helps support the deconstruction of dominant arguments, foregrounding how the entanglement of assumptions materializes in particular readings of whether or not disproportionality indicates the presence of racism. I share the matrix in this chapter with the hope that it will help facilitate the idea that patterns of opportunity hoarding and patterns of over-identification of racialized/classed students can be simultaneously true.

10.2 – Opportunities, Affordances, and the Protection of IEPs

Almost every participant in this study commented on how something—whether IEP decisions, grades, standards, parent preferences, IEP processes, or resource models—was different in their school compared to others. Differences across socioeconomic status (SES) of the school community—and all that is entangled with it—were often referenced as explanations for these variations. A group of SSELs in low-SES schools summarized:

Laura, SSEL: When you get OSRs—it's so interesting to me—you can tell what type of school the child has come from, because you're like, clearly this is not anything like our school, because there's a lot of Accommodated IEPs. Or, you know, a student got a D on their report card so that's the only reason why there's an IEP there.¹⁰⁰ So, it's very interesting [yeah!]. You can point out a student who really stands out like a sore thumb when really, they're just, you know, they're a C or D student. But in some schools, they really... you know, because they're like the lowest of the bunch, I guess, [the educators in that school] really feel like they need to implement an IEP. Which I would not be doing.

Moderator: What kind of schools? Can you describe those schools?

Laura, SSEL: I would say like, yeah, uh, different [emphasized] socioeconomic--

Sharon, SSEL: North end....

Laura, SSEL: Yeah.

Andrea, SSEL: Yeah, North.

Moderator: Ah, like [neighbourhood]?

¹⁰⁰ Note again, the possibility of differing understandings of when to initiate an IEP (after C's versus after F's)—the when-to-modify policy vacuum (Chapter 5).

[yeah yeah]

Jennifer, SSEL: and [neighbourhood].¹⁰¹

[Yeah, yeah. Yeah]

In this section, I trace four forces propelling families to seek IEPs for their children in order to secure educational opportunities. Even though several of these forces have been described in other chapters, I briefly summarize them again here to illustrate their entangled configurations within the *Apparatus of Opportunity Hoarding*.

The Pursuit of Disability as an Explanation for Undesired Grades

Several participants reported that some families interpreted undesired grades as a sign of a deeper issue such as an undiagnosed learning disability. As one SSEL in a low SES school explained,

[In schools] where they've got everything-- where they've got everything, and the parents are at home, and not like working from home or whatever, but like where there's time, and everybody sits around the table at dinner. And, you know, [if] somebody is still having a problem with Math, [it's] not because they just aren't a 'Math kid.' It's because, you know, the parents are comparing their grades with other kids and other parents, and they want an IEP to prove why [their child isn't doing as well as their peers] and that there's a problem. And I've been in schools like that. And I've seen that. And it's just like "Nah, nah, nah" [finger wagging]. (Jennifer, SSEL)

This worry, stemming from undesired grades, leads some parents to pressure the school for psycho-educational testing—a school board resource that is very limited and tightly rationed. This pressure poses additional dilemmas for educators if they do not feel that the assessment is warranted. As one SSEL in a middle-high income community described:

Jane, SSEL: Well, you know, they'll go to the trustee, they'll go to the superintendent, and then it creates-- the environment is very tense. It's tense for the teacher. It's tense for the for the resource [teacher].... It-it's-it's not that [we're] creating barriers for them, but it's also realizing that it's not a private school. We're public. We only have so many people that can offer support and so it can get tricky at times, right? ... So, sometimes we're dealing with the mentality that we want that private school environment in a publicly funded environment, which sometimes gets a bit tricky, right? ...

Moderator: What specific things are they asking for?

¹⁰¹ The neighbourhoods identified by participants are known to be predominantly white, and affluent or upper-middle class neighbourhoods in the city (J. Allen, n.d.).

Jane, SSEL: Psych assessments. They want psych assessments... Yeah, if a student is receiving a C, a C is unacceptable in our community... so if they're not getting straight A's, there's something wrong. With the C! So, they want to move forward to have a psych assessment, and then that creates tension, right? Because Level 2, that's not enough information to have a psych assessment done, right? So those are the nuances in our neighborhood. It's either [demanding] the gifted [identification or placement], or "my son's... receiving 60s or low 70s. That's not good enough. My child should be receiving Level 4s."

Moderator: So, it's a query into a learning disability?

Jane, SSEL: Yeah, yeah. 'What's going on?' 'Why is my child--?' 'Why is he--?'

This pressure from families to refer a student for formal evaluation for a learning disability, raises several questions: What do C's mean in a criterion-referenced grading system (Chapter 6)? When is psycho-educational testing necessary? Who decides what is necessary or unnecessary? How should limited resources be distributed (i.e., triaged) in public schools?

A SSEL in a high-SES community reported that families in her school often circumvented limited system resources by obtaining private assessments, sometimes at a cost of approximately \$5,000-\$10,000 depending on the tests sought (*Pricing & Insurance*, n.d.)—another example of the privatization of special education that may result in reduced funding based on a distorted perception of the "norm" (see Chapter 9). As the SSEL in this context shared,

Alana, SSEL: I'm finding now we get so many private [psycho-educational assessments]. Like I could line them all up and it's all the same recommendations in every single one! Like they're even coming from the same place [laughs]. Like all the parents talk to each other...

We've got a lot of psycho-ed assessments that are coming in all the time for kids that are getting A's and B's... Like parents are bringing their private psych [assessments] saying they need an IEP because the psychologist says they need an IEP. And we're like, "But they're getting A's!"...

So, it's-it's a weekly thing. It's weekly...

[later in the session]

Moderator: So, of the students who were performing A's and B's whose families get these private assessments, are those assessments showing learning disabilities?

Alana, SSEL: Uh, like I'm flabbergasted. In the last couple of years of my career, I'm finding some of them are. Some of them aren't. There's nothing. But some of them are showing something!

Lucas, SSEL: Yeah... Everybody's got to look for something...

Alana, SSEL: 15 years ago, when I was in another affluent school, I was doing the same position and we had some private assessments, but also even the assessments that went through the school psychologists, not every kid we recommended came back with having a learning disability. I'm finding that all of our psycho-ed assessments now are coming back showing some sort of learning disability.

This last observation is consistent with reports in both academic literature and media about an increase in the identification of learning disabilities (Epstein & ProPublica, 2017; Harrison & Sparks, 2022; R. Lewis, 2022). Several explanations for this phenomenon have been proposed, including changes to the diagnostic criteria for learning disabilities, and the possibility that the highly inclusive movements of critical disability and neurodiversity are reducing stigma around such identities and shifting the very definition of disability itself (Harrison & Sparks, 2022).

From a critical disability or a neurodiversity perspective, situating diagnostic authority within medical or psychiatric institutions (i.e., the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [DSM]) is deeply problematic. Doing so reifies a constructed boundary between a “normal” and “abnormal,” medicalizes natural variation in human diversity, privileges deficit-based frameworks, positions neurodivergence as a condition to be corrected or cured, and positions medicalized truths over lived experiences (H. M. Brown et al., 2021; Dwyer, 2022). As the concept of disability is reclaimed as a valued identity with a vibrant cultural community (Heumann, 2020; Wong, 2020), more and more individuals and families—particularly those without other marked identities (Artiles, 2003; Waitoller et al., 2010)—may be open to adopting such identities, and perhaps even seeking them.

Though critical of this shift, and the social model of disability in general, Harrison and Sparks (2022) suggest that this shift may partially influence how Ontario clinicians diagnose learning disabilities. They write,

Research has increasingly demonstrated that clinicians are making disability diagnoses in young adults using flexible and expansive diagnostic criteria, or in some cases ignoring research-informed criteria all together. Commonly exhibited behaviors long considered normal as well as average achievement are now being characterized as disabilities. (Harrison & Sparks, 2022, p. 268)

While the reclamation of disability and neurodivergence as valued identities from deficit-laden, medicalized gatekeeping is of crucial importance, I hold hope agonistically with a view that remains attentive to its paradoxes. As the analyses below will show, this essential shift also intra-

acts with other social and institutional forces to not only produce a new conception of disability, but perhaps also the conditions for opportunity seeking for a privileged few who can gain protection from the marked identity of disability while minimizing or even evading its harm (i.e., E7 in Figure 10.1).

IEPs Provide Opportunities for Higher Grades

Similar to (and entangled with) the pursuit of a diagnosis, participants reported that undesired grades also prompted parents to request an IEP for their child irrespective of disability status. Although participants acknowledged that these requests often stemmed from genuine concern, some felt they also reflected an effort to secure higher grades for students—rewards that have been shown to produce many material-discursive benefits (Chapter 7). The relationship between IEPs and higher grades was observed in at least three different ways.

First, in the case of Accommodation-only IEPs, some students earned higher grades as a result of the provision of effective accommodations. When speaking of the students in her class who were earning D's, one Grade 3 teacher explained,

Interviewer: For those who were put on an Accommodated IEP, how did that affect their evaluation process?

Selena, Grade 3 Teacher: Well, because of the accommodations, they were able to reach a little higher or achieve a little higher. And in most cases, it would be a C or a B.

Without awareness of how accommodations in elementary education often function as exemptions that may hinder the development of a particular skill (Chapter 8), the effect of increasing grades through accommodations may be a powerful motivating force for many families.

While I unequivocally support the right to accommodations as a fundamental mechanism for equity and access, I again hold this in tension with a potential for the exploitation of these rights. As Harrison and Sparks (2022) referenced,

The achievement-enhancing value of extra time accommodations was made clear during the recent College Admissions Scandal [in the U.S.], where students were coached to feign learning problems during diagnostic testing in order to obtain extra time on a college admissions test. (p. 269)

Returning to the observations of the SSEL quoted in the section above, families of students achieving A's and B's were seeking disability diagnoses through private psychoeducation evaluations which resulted in demands for particular accommodations in schools.

[The parents said] ‘Yeah, but the psychologist just said they need more time to write tests’ and we’re like, ‘At the elementary level, everyone gets all the time they need.’ [But then parents say], ‘Well, what are we gonna do when they go to middle school? We gotta set them up on an IEP ‘cause they might not get A’s in middle school.’ And we’ll be like, ‘Well your psych assessment’s gonna go on the OSR. You’ll meet with the school if there’s a-- [trails off which shaking head].’ (Alana, SSEL)

Relatedly, Harrison and colleagues (2013) found that almost half of the psychologists who conducted psychoeducational assessments and authored disability documentation for a major post-secondary institution in Ontario, believed that the primary purpose of the assessment was to help their client obtain testing accommodations. Additionally, approximately 14% of these respondents admitted that they would provide the diagnosis even if the clinical data did not meet diagnostic criteria in the DSM (Harrison et al., 2013). As the authors explained, “on one hand, the clinicians are being asked to provide an objective evaluation of the student, but on the other hand, they are advocating for a client who is paying for their services” (p. 317). Again, an agonistic view that holds two realities of accommodations in tension—one of equity and one of inequity—is essential for tracing how inclusive practices can produce the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle.

A second way that IEPs can create an opportunity for higher grades, is through curriculum modifications (i.e., Modified IEPs), as students are no longer graded according to provincial standards (Chapter 7). As one principal in a mid-high SES school observed, this led to parents demanding Modified IEPs in their school:

I get more parents asking for modifications than I do teachers asking to put the kids on modifications... And the kids don't need them. That's-- almost every single time I have a parent asking for modification, the kids are C-- they're getting C's¹⁰² and B's. And I'm like, "No! We're not changing the curriculum for them." "Well, we want A's!"... [laughter]. “We'll work towards getting that, but we're not changing the program so that you-your child can get an A.” And that's at multiple schools. That's not just my little, tiny school right now. That's been at most of my schools. (Donna, Administrator)

A SSEL in a high SES school described a similar pattern, although, as she explained, despite the school's resistance, the families pushed until the gatekeepers (in this case the SST) relented.

And so, the consultant usually is like, “No, no, no, no. We're not modifying programs. We're not.” But then they get like the parents in, and the teacher in, and then by the end of the meeting she says, “Yeah, go ahead and modify the program.” So, there's no rules.

¹⁰² Note again, the possibility of differing understandings of when to initiate an IEP (after C's versus after F's)—the when-to-modify policy vacuum (Chapter 5).

Or there's exception to every rule... Nobody wants to give a C, and nobody wants to talk to the parents about the kids getting a C, but a C shouldn't [result in] a modified program.¹⁰³ A C-- definitely they're not meeting all of the standards, but they're *approaching* the standards! (Alana, SSEL)

This quote raises critical questions of how schools respond to family pressure for access to specific supports and services: which families do educators resist, and to whom do they ultimately concede? —a key force in the Apparatus of Opportunity Hoarding.

A third pattern that emerged, albeit more subtly, reflected a more indirect way that IEPs can lead to higher grades. Some participants reported that IEPs could result in inflated grades if a teacher feared accusations from a parent (or from administrators) that they were not implementing the IEP effectively. One participant described how student underperformance is “always thrown back at the teacher. [They ask] ‘What have you done?’ ‘What have you tried?’ ‘Let's see some examples’” (Selena, Grade 3 Teacher). Although this mechanism is admittedly indirect and less verifiable, it nevertheless highlights how improvements in a child’s grades following the implementation of an IEP can reinforce parents’ perceptions of its efficacy—a perception that may further strengthen motivation to pursue this path among their networks. As the SSEL in the section above explained, “all the parents talk to each other” (Alana, SSEL).

IEPs as an Accountability Tool

According to the Board’s *2024-25 Special Education Plan*, “an IEP is an accountability tool for the student, parents/guardians/caregivers, and everyone who has responsibilities for helping the student” meet the child’s learning needs (Toronto District School Board, 2024b, p. 160). Yet, as described in Chapters 4 and 7, many of the accommodations listed in *The Individual Education Plan (IEP) Resource Guide* (2004a) and commonly used in IEPs are simply considered “just good teaching” practices. For example, the strategy of “strategic seating” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 29)—placing a student near the teacher, or close to the door, or away from distracting peers—is a longstanding classroom management practice and not necessarily a specialized support. Likewise, using “graphic organizers” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 29)—providing visual representations to display topics, ideas and/or relationships—is also widely recognized as an effective teaching strategy for all learners and not unique to special education. Given this significant overlap, entangled with the Board’s mandate

¹⁰³ Again, as above.

to reduce the number of IEPs in the system, it is not surprising that they introduced the *K-1 IEP Strategy* and *2-12 IEP Review* policies to restrict—or as most participants interpreted, eliminate—Accommodation-only IEPs (Chapter 4). However, when these policies were introduced into the Board’s special education ecosystem in 2022, there was a shift in who could access IEPs as an accountability tool, and for what purpose.

This bold policy move was based on the assumption that there would be a shared understanding of specific strategies that would be implemented through DI, UDL, and “just good teaching,” something that was not outlined by the Board and therefore a significant policy vacuum. Second, it assumed that these strategies would, in fact, be implemented. This policy rhetoric is far from the policy reality where teachers often have contradictory opinions of what constitutes DI and UDL (Basham et al., 2020; Dolmage, 2015), and where many teachers struggle with employing these strategies in their daily practices (Basham et al., 2020). The move to eliminate Accommodation-only IEPs in favour of the idealistic enactment of DI and UDL, therefore left many students who were previously entitled to specific accommodations in their IEPs, at the mercy of each individual teacher’s interpretation of DI and UDL, their judgement of who is deserving of each particular support, and their ability to enact them.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has taken an interesting approach to their accommodation policy in recognition of the significant overlap between accommodations and strategies promoted through UDL. They distinguish between *universal accommodations*—supports that any student can access without documentation or a formal IEP, and *justifiable accommodations*—strategies that are specific to a particular student and outlined in their IEP (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010). By making this distinction, and by producing a policy artifact with a list of universal accommodations that can serve as an accountability tool for all students to use in advocating for “just good teaching” strategies, they have theoretically decreased the need for an IEP to serve this purpose.

In the Board, without a shared understanding of what should be provided through DI and UDL, or a policy artifact that can serve as an accountability tool, the Accommodation-only IEP becomes a way for some privileged families to ensure that their child can access “just good teaching.” This is particularly important for families of students for whom “just good teaching” is essential to their learning. As another SSEL shared,

Honestly, I think a lot of parents need that [IEP] because it keeps the teachers accountable... There's still, you know, teachers who you need that. I don't know if it's fear, but like that piece of [paper]. Like, 'Look, this is on here and this is... what this kid needs.' (Lucas, SSEL)

In this sense, an IEP is not necessarily based on a student's needs, but rather the teacher's need to be held accountable to the practices ostensibly provided through DI, UDL, or "just good teaching" (Chapter 7).

As with the section above, the access to an accountability tool for some but not others raises the question of which families continue to access Accommodated-only IEPs despite the *K-1 IEP Strategy* and *2-12 IEP Review* mandates to reduce them, and which families are excluded from this opportunity.

Opportunities for Additional Instructional Support

Finally, as mentioned in Chapters 7 and 9, IEPs may also unlock access to other special education services including resource support or self-contained classes. One Inclusion Consultant described how they were being pressured to initiate a Modified IEP that indicated that the student was performing at a particular grade level (four years behind) so that the student would qualify for a self-contained special education class for students with learning disabilities in secondary school. The consultant explained,

Nancy, Inclusion Consultant: So, for today, this morning, I was in a classroom, funnily enough, doing just that! Where the parents want the IEP modified for Reading, and the teacher is pushing back and saying no. So, I went in today to observe the student, to do some assessments, to do that extra level, right? Like I said, this parent's pushing back, and they want the IEP modified. And I'm like, "No." And the teachers agree. But the parent wants the IEP modified.

Moderator: Why do they want it modified?

Nancy, Inclusion Consultant: This is a Grade 7 student. They want the child looked at for a possible Intensive Support Program in Grade 9.

Even though IEPs, self-contained classes, and involvement with special education more broadly can carry several potential negative consequences, these may be unbeknownst to the families advocating for them. Alternatively, families may be aware of potential consequences but judge them to be outweighed by the benefits based on other factors in their child's particular situation (i.e., F1 in Figure 10.1). Ultimately, some families can pursue a pathway toward higher grades

and greater academic success—a pathway that may foster greater feelings of self-efficacy and expand access to future opportunities—a powerful motivating force for many.

Taken together, the sections above illustrate that some students with IEPs may be afforded opportunities such as higher grades, a tool for holding teachers accountable to “good teaching” practices, or access to additional instructional support. Whether the benefits of these opportunities are real or perceived is irrelevant to the fact that many privileged families are aggressively seeking them for their children. One SSEL in a high-SES school framed this pattern as an equity issue:

Alana, SSEL: In the school I'm in now, because of the way it's done, there's a lot that's done sort of unofficially... So, it's like, you know, the loudest teacher or the loudest parent... Like there's a lot of things that kind of slip through without referrals.

Moderator: Like what?

Alana, SSEL: Like referrals for psycho-ed assessments, referrals for social work, like for speech and language therapy. There's a lot of that kind of stuff that goes through sort of unofficially. We kind of just push it through...

And I feel like sometimes we're saying, “we're not modifying programs,” but when the parent says, “I want it modified,” we do it. So, there's a lack of professionalism there in the sense that, like, our school team should know what's best and we have to listen to parents. I'm not saying we can't listen... we have to approach things as a team and every case is different, but I am getting discouraged by what I see in terms of privilege and how that impacts students.

This SSEL's observations are consistent with growing academic literature demonstrating how some privileged families leverage policies, laws, and social networks to overpower educators' professional judgements (Diamond & Lewis, 2022; Voulgarides, 2018). These observations suggest that the power dynamics between families and educators—dynamics that shift within each unique context—play a significant role in the Apparatus of Opportunity Hoarding, and in the IEP ecosystem more generally.

10.3 – Exclusionary Forces in the Apparatus of Opportunity Hoarding

The second component of opportunity hoarding is that members of non-privileged groups are excluded from it. In this study, restricted access to the potential protective affordances of IEPs was produced through two apparatuses—ironically, one shaped by anti-racist forces (the justifiable refusal of oppression), and the other through racist forces (stratified IEP gatekeeping).

Such contradictory forces pulling in the same direction adds an interesting layer of complexity to the analysis which will be taken up in 10.4.

Anti-racist Forces in the Refusal of IEPs

Participants in schools serving low SES and predominantly racialized communities reported that families often resisted the initiation of an IEP. This resistance is sometimes mischaracterized as families not valuing their child's education, being in denial, or not wanting their child to benefit from support—an assumption exemplified by Morgan and colleagues (2015), and critiqued by Park (2024). These harmful narratives are not only unfounded but rooted in racial ideologies. Many marginalized families are acutely aware of the inequitable and stratified outcomes for children from their communities with IEPs and are justifiably skeptical of the benefits they will offer their children (i.e., E2 and E8 in Figure 10.1).

Parents are not coming to us asking for IEPs. In fact, if we've sometimes asked parents for testing and so on to be done-- because there's a lot of stereotypes, especially in the Black community and um, around anti-black racism and so on where people have been streamed-- people are quite often apprehensive and wary about that. And where their kids would end up. (Tracey, Administrator in a low SES school)

We do not have parents coming to ask us for IEPs [laughs]. Definitely not! They don't want their children on an IEP. They wanna avoid it as much as they can. (Alicia, Administrator in a low SES school)

With its roots in the eugenics movement (Ellis, 2019), special education has a long history of reinforcing inequality (Domina et al., 2017). Since the 1960s families and researchers have raised concerns about the differential treatment of some marginalized groups within special education (Dunn, 1968), particularly low income students, Black, Latine, and Indigenous students, as well as ELL students. Disproportionality has been noted in referral and identification processes (Fish, 2022; Sullivan & Proctor, 2016). Studies have shown that racialized/classed¹⁰⁴ students are more likely to be identified with more subjective disability categories including Mild Intellectual Disabilities (MID) and Conduct Disorder (Annamma et al., 2013a; Artiles et al., 2010; R. S. Brown & Parekh, 2013) and less likely to be selected for Gifted programs (Parekh, 2013b). Furthermore, once identified, some racialized/classed groups are disproportionately

¹⁰⁴ Several equity-focused scholars have demonstrated that race and class cannot be meaningfully separated, either conceptually, statistically, or analytically, as race is classed, and class is racialized (Dixon-Román, 2017; Gillborn et al., 2018; Lopez et al., 2018). I therefore use the term racialized/classed to signal this co-constructed positioning and to avoid implying that these categories operate independently.

more likely to be placed in programs associated with limited future opportunities, regardless of identification labels (Connor, 2017; Mitchell, 2010; Parekh, 2013b). It is therefore not surprising that many families would want to resist these outcomes for their children.

Like families, many educators (teachers, SSELs, and administrators included) are also wary of sending children from marginalized groups down the special education pipeline. After many years of sustained anti-racism and anti-oppression professional learning work in the Board, these efforts were evident in several participants' remarks. One vice-principal commented:

And I think our educators are [reluctant] too. Like, these are conversations that we have in our regular staff meetings, so they are aware of it. We always have that discussion: Why this child? Why now? Like, what and how are- how would these modifications make a difference for that child? And if it's not gonna make a difference for that child, then we're not doing it. We're not gonna put them on an IEP! (Alicia, Administrator in a mixed-SES school)

The Board's commitment to equity and anti-oppression work has been critical in shifting policies, practices, and awareness, and these achievements must be recognized as essential and ongoing. However, as these efforts begin to move the dial, it is necessary to reconsider the next steps toward achieving true educational equity. By drawing on a framework of opportunity hoarding, a more complex dynamic between privilege and marginalization becomes visible: if privileged groups continue to disproportionately access the benefits of IEPs, then simply reducing the harm to marginalized students will not result in equity. This issue will be discussed in Section 10.4.

Persistent Racist Forces in IEP Gatekeeping

Unlike *anti-racist* refusals of a system known to cause harm, the second force—stratified gatekeeping—appears to be shaped by ongoing *racist* ideologies. This emerged in two different forms during the interviews and focus group sessions.

Stratified Explanations of Student Under-performance

In addition to all of the other forces previously described in this dissertation, educators' interpretations of the need to initiate an IEP are partially shaped by their perceptions of student potential. When teachers hold low expectations for certain students, they may accept underperformance as an expected outcome rather than as a signal of unmet learning needs—revealing how constructions of ability are shaped by and unevenly applied across different groups of students. Unlike the participants in high SES schools who reported that IEPs were

often initiated after a student's grades fell below what was expected of them, some participants in low SES schools normalized performance at that same level:

Laura, SSEL: I'm sorry, but most of our kids are C and D students

Jennifer, SSEL: Yeah, and it's okay- and it's okay, right?

Laura, SSEL: And it is okay.

Comments like these were often shrouded in very accepting and inclusive discourses. As one participant demonstrated,

Sometimes it's okay if the kid is a C kid, if they're not an A and a B kid. Some kids are just not going to be fabulous scholars. They're kind. They're gentle. They're honest. They're great at gym. They're great at music. They have all kinds of other qualities. They have all of the learning skills. They can get along. They study hard. They-- you know, like they're just not "A" kids. (Jennifer, SSEL in low-SES school)

From one perspective, these comments are well-aligned with ideologies of DSE and inclusive education as they demonstrate valuing students for more than just their academic achievement, they widen the range of an acceptable "norm," and they resist the pathologization a very common level of student performance (Baglieri, 2017; Sapon-Shevin, 2007). Yet, underlying this inclusive discourse is the acceptance of lower performance for specific students—in the comments above, students in a low SES school in a predominantly racialized community. Fish (2022) observed a similar pattern in her study of special education referrals in Wisconsin. She observed that,

teachers often perceived lower academic skills and lack of growth among Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children, as well as White girls, as "normal." The racialized and gendered discourses available to teachers framed their expectations for students, resulting in "stratified noticing" of academic difficulties. (p. 7)

If such inclusive discourses are disproportionately over-applied to marginalized students, they may inadvertently reify the racialization of expectations and contradict the very intent of the inclusive discourse. Yet, there is no clear alternative. Highlighted here is the tension between two undesirable options: The acceptance of the academic underperformance of some racialized/classed students, or the medicalization of it.

Stratified Responses to Family Advocacy

A key force in the Apparatus of Opportunity Hoarding is the power dynamic between educators and families, which varies from context to context. Highlighted here is the question:

Which families do educators typically resist, and to which families do they ultimately concede? In Section 10.2, I provided several examples of how privileged families over-rode participants' professional judgement to secure what they wanted. Here, I share one participant's story demonstrating resistance to a parent advocating for an IEP for their child.

One form of gatekeeping occurs when educators view racialized/classed parents with suspicion and interpret their advocacy as manipulation or as having ulterior motives. This has been observed in previous research (Fish, 2022) and was evident in one of the focus group sessions as two of the participants in low-SES schools described immigrant families as disingenuously seeking IEPs in order to get money from the government. The excerpt below contains racist comments that may be upsetting to some readers.

Laura, SSEL: And then the biggest pieces now that's in some of these communities is if your kid gets an IEP, then you get money from the government! So that's like another piece to it too. So, there is sometimes a push for parents to come to these schools brand new and push for an IEP. And sometimes it's not in the best interest of the kids, so.

Jennifer, SSEL: Well, and also because in [this Board] we don't need a diagnosis [yeah yeah - participants agreeing]. Then that's misinformation that's spreading among these families... [Yeah]. I had a very similar situation. We got a new student who's never been to school [pause with raised eyebrows]. He arrived in September, Grade 4. We got nothing [no paperwork] with him... He was born [in this city] [raises eyebrows], and [pause] his parents had literally been hiding him at home [sad pity voice]. And they would go back to their home country for 3 or 4 months out of the year. And so, he walked into our school in Grade 4, and everybody looked and went "Wha-ha-hat is happening here!?!". This is not.... This child is NOT working with all of the different pieces that other children come in with at Grade 4!

Um... and the dad came to me after I made a phone call, and I said "I have some concerns [in a very slow, gentle, voice like speaking to a small child]. Here's what we're seeing in class." We don't have any language. We don't-- [trails off and rolls eyes]. And it's not an ESL piece [in a sing song voice]. And he said, "Oh! He has Autism." And I said, "Oh, surprise!" [sarcastically].

And you know what the dad said!?!: "We want an IEP so we can get funding." And I actually said [high pitched voice like talking to a small child] "That's actually *NOT* the way it works! Do you have a diagnosis paper?" And he said, "No, that's just what people have told me." [laughs]. So, I said "Oh, we need to do that first." So, like these things happen in communities, right? Where... parents come and have [sigh] different expectations [sad pity tone].

[later in the session]

Andrea, SSEL: I just have to clarify the whole money piece around an IEP.

Sharon, SSEL: Yeah, I've never heard that.

Andrea, SSEL: Yeah.

Moderator: Yeah, sorry [Laura], where do parents hear that they can get money?

Laura, SSEL: When you do taxes. When you do your taxes there's like something on there.

Sharon, SSEL: But it's for the disability tax credit because my own [child] is on it.

Laura, SSEL: That's correct, yeah, but I don't understand.

Sharon, SSEL: You cannot get it without... you cannot get it just based on an IEP because I know for my own son, you need it to have.... [crosstalk] and it was crazy trying to prove it.

Laura, SSEL: Yeah, well, [crosstalk] I don't know like-- There's-- I work with-- um, how do I say this in the right way? Like, there's... you know, certain people out in the world that do certain things, and they're not-not the way the system's supposed to be.

Jennifer, SSEL: Of course. Yeah.

Laura, SSEL: Right. And I think since COVID, especially with the government giving out money, you know, certain kids would get \$100, but kids, if you could show an IEP or whatever, you get \$200. And I know, um, like, as long as they have like a medical diagnosis or whatnot, and I'm sure the IEP helps with that. But some of our families find ways.

Sharon, SSEL: Mm-hmm.

Laura, SSEL: That's just what they do. Like, it's not- it's not a one-off. It's in a few-few cases. To say it in the right way. Um...

Jennifer, SSEL: We have our social worker sit with parents who *need* [emphasis] funding. Who *deserve* [emphasis] the funding. Who have the... who have all of the paperwork for the funding. And we are very clear. Like, I can take on a lot of people out in the yard sometimes, and when I hear people saying the wrong thing, I say, "No, your information is not correct. That is not what happens, and that's not what you need." So, like, it's very interesting. And it's wonderful that people are networking. And it's wonderful that they're actually talking about what their kids need. But they just need to make sure that it's the right information. Sorry.

At the start of the excerpt SSEL 2 clearly acknowledges that a formal diagnosis is not needed for an IEP in the Board. Yet, when the parent requested an IEP, she asked for "a diagnosis paper" and then instructed the father that he must do that first—a difficult, lengthy process, that can be very costly. Her insistence of a formal diagnosis is particularly puzzling because she also

strongly implies that the child has observable support needs (“This child is *NOT* working with all of the different pieces that other children come in with at Grade 4!”). Her resistance to initiating an IEP and her incredulity that the father would ask for one without a formal diagnosis, is contradictory and grounded in racist ideologies.

Taken together, these two forces outlined in this section—anti-racist forces in the resistance of IEPs, and racist forces in IEP gatekeeping—collectively produce the exclusion of some marginalized students from accessing IEPs. Ultimately, these entangled forces contribute to the production of opportunity hoarding.

10.4 – Implications for Equity, Research and Anti-Oppression Work

Disproportionality literature has predominantly focused on the problem over-representation of racialized/classed students in special education with the underlying assumption that it will be predominantly harmful to them (Voulgarides et al., 2017; Waitoller et al., 2010). This body of research has been instrumental in illuminating mechanisms of structural racism within education systems. However, an unintended consequence of frequently using *disproportional* representation as evidence of systemic racism, is that some people draw the faulty conclusion that *proportional* representation will in itself produce equity. It will not. Proportionality does not reflect justice; it is a surface level metric of sameness. In other words, the goal of proportional representation is one of *equality*, which is not the same as *equity*. Such logic, though misguided, is not uncommon. It was evident in Morgan et al.’s (2015) influential claims that because they did not find evidence of the over-representation of minoritized students in several disability identifications, special education was therefore not racist (Morgan, 2015; Morgan et al., 2015). This erroneous interpretation overlooks the shifting forms of inequity that persist beneath the surface of the numbers, including the effects of opportunity hoarding.

Proportional Representation is *Equality*, not *Equity*

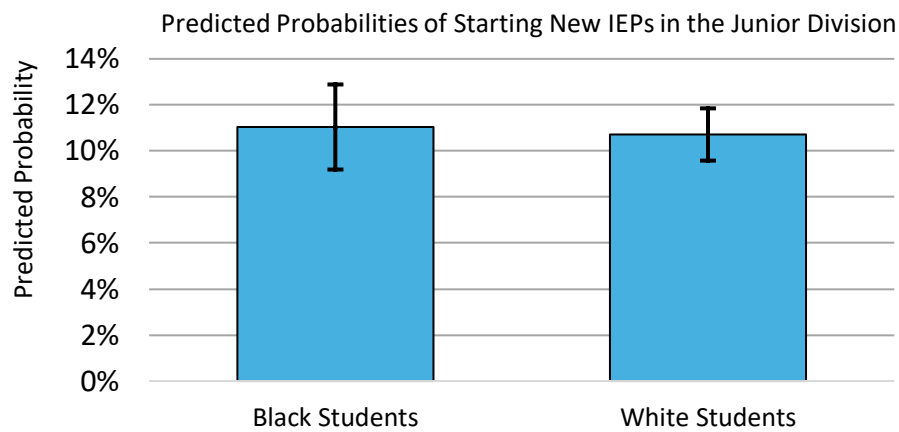
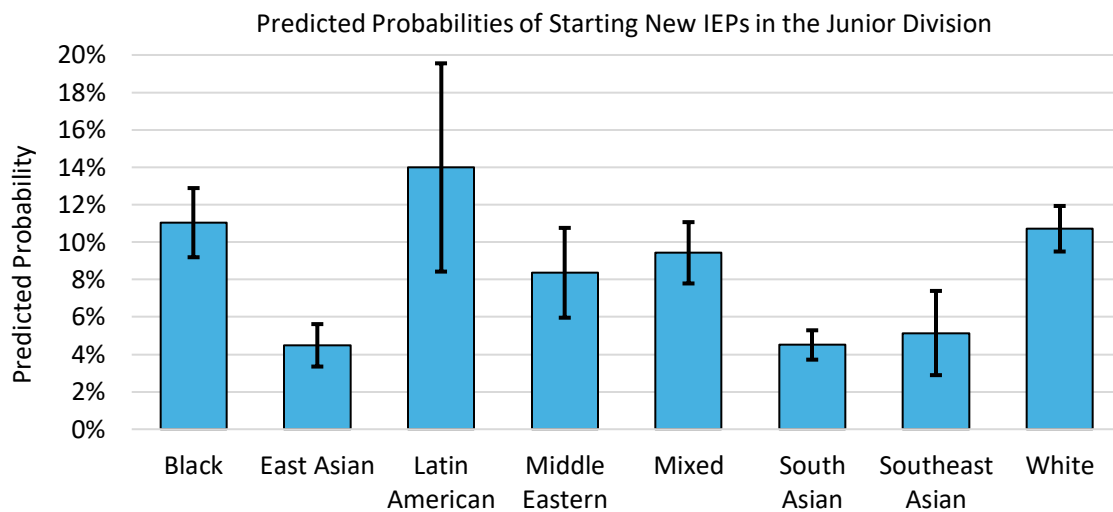
When I first began working with the Board’s transitions dataset (Chapter 2), patterns of disproportionality were not immediately apparent. It was only through ongoing analysis that I began to see how proportionality could obscure inequities as much as it could reveal them. As my understanding of the data deepened, I noticed three ways in which analyses that lack specificity could produce proportional results that mask inequities.

First, when examining patterns of new IEPs initiated in the junior division (Chapter 4), I noticed that the difference between the predicted probabilities of Black students and white students starting a new IEP in the junior division was minimal. If the analysis was limited to these two groups alone¹⁰⁵ as some studies have done (Castillo & Babb, 2024), this proportional result could be interpreted as race/racism not being a significant predictor in the initiation of IEPs. However, when expanding the analysis beyond the Black/white binary, the force of race/racism in the apparatus becomes more apparent as there are clear trends across different racial groups, particularly East Asian students and Latine students (Figure 10.2).

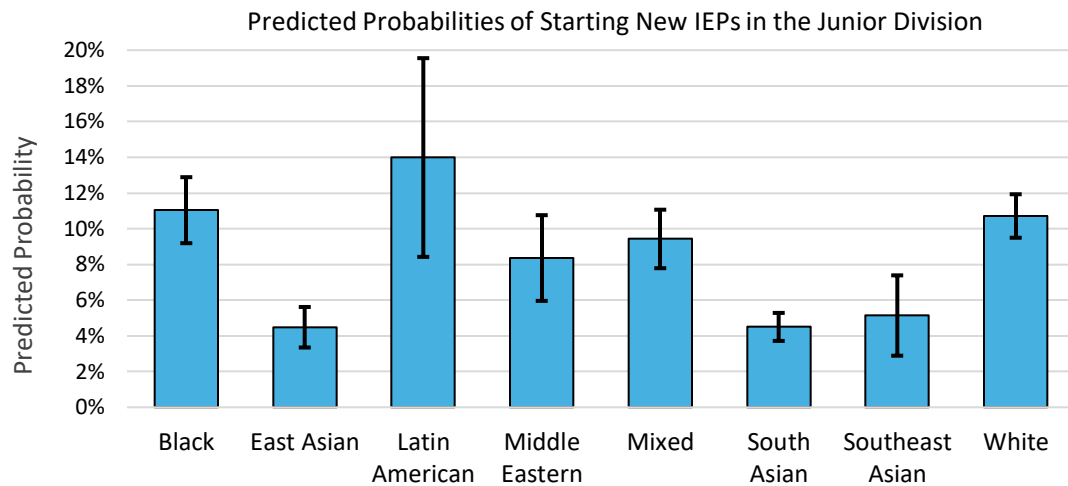
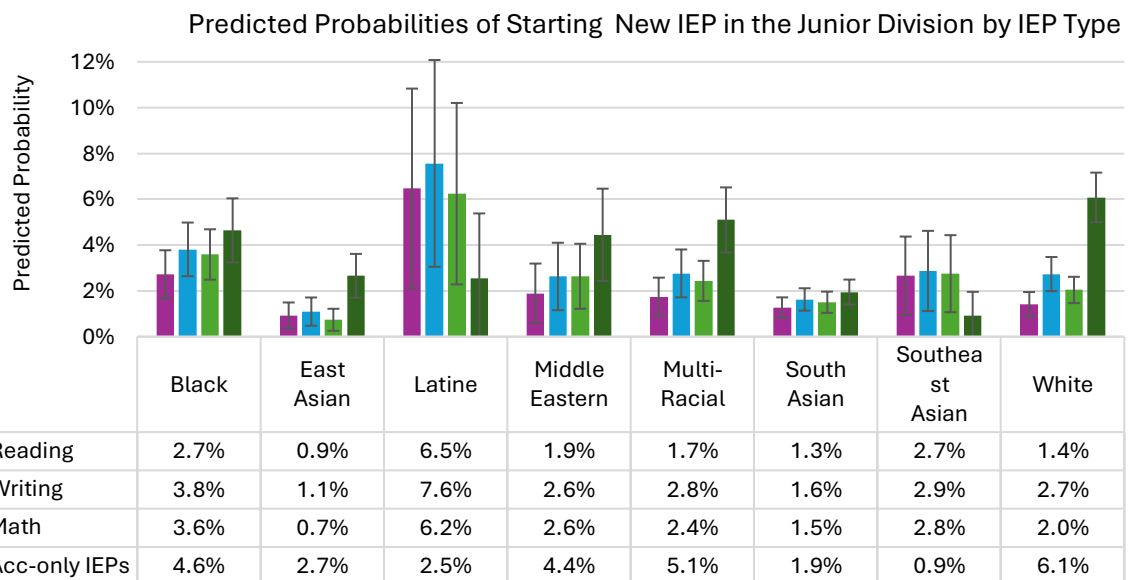
A second way that proportionality masked inequities was when IEP types were aggregated. Until recently, this has been the standard practice in Ontario as separate variables for Accommodation-only versus Modified IEPs have not been available. As described above, there was initially little difference between the predicted probabilities of Black and white students¹⁰⁶ starting new IEPs in the junior division; however, once the data was disaggregated by IEP type, patterns of stratification within and across racial groups became more apparent (Figure 10.3).

¹⁰⁵ The analysis of racism using only data of Black people and white people is not uncommon (Castillo & Babb, 2024; Cruz & Rodl, 2018); however, this reduction is often highly problematic as it erases the experiences of other racial groups, overlooks the intersectionality of identities, and positions the rates of white students as the benchmark for fairness (Bottiani et al., 2023; Castillo & Babb, 2024).

¹⁰⁶ The Black/white binary is used intentionally used here because they are large groups with proportionate results and can be used to demonstrate how, despite this proportionality, are experiencing inequities.

Figure 10.2*Analysis of Dis/Proportionality Based on Race***Example A: Analysis Limited to Black Students and White Students****Example B: Analysis Across More Racial Groups**

Note. Based on students without IEPs in Grade 3. Excludes students with Gifted or DD exceptionalities. Controls for gender and income. As explained in Chapter 2, data for self-identifying Indigenous students was not available in the dataset.

Figure 10.3*Analysis of Dis/Proportionality Based on IEP Type***Example A: Analysis of IEPs****Example B: Analysis of IEPs by Type**

Note. Based on students without IEPs in Grade 3. Excludes students with Gifted or DD exceptionalities. Controls for gender and income.

White students were the group most likely to be put on an Accommodation-only IEP while in the junior division, and they were more likely to be put on an Accommodation-only IEP than a Modified IEP. This revealed a key difference between the experiences between white students

and Black students on IEPs. Though still relatively high compared to other groups, Black students were less likely to be put on an Accommodation-only IEP than white students—a pattern that was not apparent when IEP type was aggregated.¹⁰⁷ Stratification across other racial groups was even more illuminating with Latine and Southeast Asian students being significantly more likely to be put on a Modified IEP than an Accommodation-only IEP (Chapter 5), and East Asian students being rarely put on Modified IEPs at all.

The stratified distribution of Accommodation-only IEPs and Modified IEPs across racial groups¹⁰⁸ highlights the importance of not just looking at the proportional involvement with special education but rather the specific ways in which students are involved, and the differential outcomes of that involvement. In this case, proportional *involvement* with IEPs masks the disproportional *effects* if white students experience greater benefits (i.e., E1 or E7 in Figure 10.1) and Black students experience greater harm (i.e., E2 or E8 in Figure 10.1). The question then is what assumptions regarding students' experiences underly disproportionality studies? What is the basis of those assumptions (Section 10.1)? Do these assumptions account for heterogeneous experiences between groups, within groups, and even within individuals?

A third way that proportionality can mask inequity is through directionality. For the most part, regression analyses capture a snapshot in time. But this snapshot does not capture the forces that produced the ratios in that moment—forces that could be rooted in racism, anti-racism, or both. In Section 10.3, I provided examples of how both racist and anti-racist forces influenced who was selected for IEPs (B1 and B4 in Figure 10.1) and who was not (B2 and B3 in Figure 10.1).¹⁰⁹ While these forces may result in proportional representation, interpreting proportionality (or even under-representation as Morgan and colleagues have done [2015]) as representing an equitable system fails to account for the plurality of experiences that produced those ratios. Without attention to the qualitative dynamics driving quantitative patterns, there is a risk that quantitative disproportionality research will mask rather than reveal the mechanisms of systemic injustice.

¹⁰⁷ Regrettably, the sample size was not large enough in all racial groups to facilitate an intersectional analysis of race and SES using interaction effects. However, this would be an important area for future investigation.

¹⁰⁸ Keep in mind that all students included in this analysis achieved Level 2 (C) or above on the Grade 3 EQAO (Chapter 4).

¹⁰⁹ For better or for worse depending on one's assumptions about the benefit or harm of IEP (column C in Figure 10.2).

The analysis in this section raises several fundamental questions about disproportionality research: What do we want from disproportionality research? How can the complex intra-actions of the three axes presented in Figure 10.1 be accounted for? Not to mention, all of the forces that produce them? How are pursuit, reluctance, and resistance accounted for in the data? How does a phenomenon like opportunity hoarding affect proportionality? What claims can be made in a system that facilitates both enabling and disabling practices? What conclusions can be drawn from quantitative data alone? When might an analysis be specific enough to warrant trust? If the apparatuses that produce involvement are unique to every context, should disproportionality data be aggregated across schools, systems, provinces? What might aggregated data mask? What might it reveal? Finally, if proportionality does not equal equity, what are the goals of disproportionality remedies?

Implications for Equity Work in the Board

The assumption that proportionality will produce equity is also evident in some of the strategies used to remedy over-representation. The Board's *ILP, K-1 IEP Strategy, and 2-12 IEP Review* policies were specifically introduced to address this problem (Salmon, et al., 2023). However, as demonstrated throughout this chapter, if privileged groups continue to access benefits and opportunities through IEPs (e.g., E1 and E7 of Figure 10.1) then reducing the harm to marginalized students by restricting their access to these same opportunities (e.g., E3, E4, E5, and E6 of Figure 10.1) will not result in equity.

A more agonistic understanding of disproportionality invites us to move beyond surface-level metrics of involvement with special education towards a deeper examination of how opportunity and harms are distributed within the IEP system itself. As illustrated in Section 10.1, there are clear demographic differences between students with Accommodation-only and Modified IEPs. The differential impacts of these IEP types require further investigation to understand how outcomes vary across student groups and contexts. Yet, we must not fall prone to binary assumptions about who benefits and who is harmed. Such reductionist dichotomies continue to oversimplify this problem. Attention to specificity—when might students benefit, when might students experience harm, under what conditions, and in what ways—is essential to move the conversation towards how to navigate the educational equity paradox. As demonstrated in Chapter 8, there are at least three different ways that Modified IEPs are employed in the Board. Each approach likely intra-acts with other forces in student specific contexts to produce

advantages and disadvantages. This too requires disaggregated research. Without addressing the underlying mechanisms that stratify opportunity and outcomes, efforts to achieve proportionality risk reproducing inequities rather than dismantling them.

Complex problems require complex remedies. Systems seeking to advance anti-oppression work must evolve to account for the multiple coexisting realities of privilege and marginalization through IEPs. Although patterns of unequal access, differential treatment, and disparate outcomes (Artiles et al., 2011; Connor, 2017; Dunn, 1968; Voulgarides, 2018) have long-been documented, recognizing that opportunity hoarding and marginalization through over-representation can occur simultaneously challenges the binary logics that dominate the field. Examining these entangled logics through an agonistic matrix creates space for both phenomena to coexist—revealing the tensions that sustain inequity while opening new possibilities for dialogue and more equitable remedies.

Chapter 11: Ongoing Tensions, Recommendations, and Concluding Thoughts

What is Special Education and Who is it for?

[T]here seems to be a firm belief that there is room for only two options, and if the current one doesn't work, then its opposite must do the job. This is a primal, reductionist way of thinking, nested in our reptilian brain, which perpetuates a dogmatic, bipolar mentality and education, rather than allowing for the emergence of a holistic social environment, where nuances, intuition, diversity of options, and ability to integrate information from apparently unrelated fields come together in a meaningful way. (Gheorghe, 2022, p. 126)

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) have been a staple of Ontario's education system for over 25 years. Originally introduced during a time of sweeping reform, IEPs, accommodations, and curriculum modifications have taken a backseat to more visible policies in the education ecosystem. Although IEPs have since been the subject of significant critique, they have not yet undergone meaningful revision or reform. Now, with growing recognition of special education's limitations and inequities, it is time to fundamentally rethink how the IEP system—including curriculum modifications—can be transformed to ensure dignity, equity, and justice in the education of all students.

I entered this research after witnessing many classroom teachers using curriculum modifications in ways that differed from how I understood them to be used. In my professional capacities as a special education leader and an instructional coach in the Board, I observed the tremendous variation in how, when, and why the curriculum modification policy was enacted, and over time, I began to suspect that, in many cases, these uses were more disabling than enabling. Taken together with the Board's ongoing equity and anti-oppression professional learning work—which emphasized how special education can reproduce inequality—I began to suspect that curriculum modification might represent a specific mechanism for systemic oppression that warranted closer investigation.

A review of the literature confirmed this need. The existing scholarship on curriculum modification is sparse, and what exists often conflates accommodations and modifications within IEPs, masking the distinct effects of these fundamentally different practices. After factoring issues of conflicting or conflating terminology, only a handful of articles directly address the topic of curriculum modification—most of which are in the context of supporting students

identified as having intellectual disability. This literature affirms the potential for Modified IEPs to be enabling for some students but leaves their use for students with other exceptionality labels largely unexamined. The literature on disproportionality in special education holds another significant gap. While it has consistently demonstrated persistent inequities, as Sullivan and Proctor (2016) explain, it has yet to identify the specific apparatuses through which disproportionality is produced:

Despite decades of research, understanding of the mechanisms specifically underpinning disproportionality is limited... Qualitative scholarship has linked disproportionality to inadequate opportunities to learn and inappropriate referral and evaluation practices (e.g., Harry & Klingner, 2006; Knotek, 2003) ... Yet, there has been considerably little attention in recent years to systematically studying the processes and decisions that may contribute to disproportionality, so understanding of race-, cultural-, or language-based differences in (in)appropriate referral and identification has stalled. (pp. 279-280)

This gap points to the importance of examining not only who is over- or under-represented in special education, but *how* particular policies and practices—like curriculum modifications—produce stratified experiences. It is my hope that this dissertation offers meaningful insights to these critical gaps in the literature.

This dissertation makes several significant empirical, methodological, and theoretical contributions. In Section 11.1, I outline seven clusters of the most significant empirical findings, along with suggested actions for the Board and MoE policy leaders. In Sections 11.2 and 11.3, I describe the methodological and theoretical contributions of this work. Altogether, this dissertation is a call to reimagine special education. The lingering questions presented below are an invitation to engage in productive, depolarized dialogue about the future of curriculum modifications, IEPs, and special education more broadly—one that must address the deep structural mechanisms that produce this phenomenon.

11.1 – Empirical Findings, Importance, and Implications

The presence of an IEP is often assumed to be an objective reflection of a student's need. However, as demonstrated throughout this dissertation, the initiation of an IEP is produced by complex apparatuses involving subjective decisions, contextual factors, and systemic structures. A central purpose of this research was to trace these apparatuses. In the sections below, I summarize seven clusters of key findings, along with suggested actions for Board and MoE

policy leaders, lingering questions, and directions for future research. These seven clusters are then followed by a summary of the empirical contributions from this study.

1) What is the Purpose of Curriculum Modification?

One of the most important take-aways of this research is that curriculum modifications serve multiple functions in the Board's elementary schools. While the intended purpose of the policy is not clearly articulated in the MoE policy texts, it originated at a time where curriculum modifications were being introduced primarily to provide curricular access for students identified as having intellectual disability. Over the past twenty-five years, the use of curriculum modifications has expanded well beyond this small population of students and is now being employed to serve multiple purposes—unintended purposes with unintended consequences. Below are descriptions of six functions of the curriculum modification policy that emerged in this study, along with corresponding recommendations, directions for future research, and/or enduring questions.

A Tool for Inclusion

Consistent with the original purpose of curriculum modifications, several participants described modifying the Ontario curriculum so that it was accessible to their student (Chapter 8). In practice, this looked like selecting goals that would leverage the student's strengths, ensure that the student would be successful in the class and be able to participate in activities in a meaningful way. Yet participants also reported that the goals set through modifying the curriculum to facilitate inclusion did not necessarily match the student's most important next steps for learning. In other words, while modification could provide access, it was insufficient on its own to promote learning; it must be paired with purposeful intervention and individualized learning goals that target students' areas of need. Without a dual focus on both access and growth, the use of curriculum modification in this way risks restricting opportunity for skill development.

Lingering Questions. If modification is used as a tool for inclusion, where, when and how will the student work towards their individual learning objectives? Who holds responsibility for ensuring that both access and opportunity for skill development are addressed?

A Tool for Grade Retention in a Context of Social Promotion

Data also revealed that Modified IEPs were serving as a form of grade retention in the context of social promotion (Chapters 5 and 8). After decades of research demonstrating the

harm of both grade retention and social promotion, a consensus in scholarship was reached: that neither approach could address students' learning needs without appropriate instruction.

However, as shown in Chapters 8 and 9, curriculum modifications rarely translate into effective instruction. Additionally, as special education is so closely associated with notions of disability, the use of a special education tool—the IEP—results in the unnecessary medicalization of all schooling difficulties which may have additional unintended consequences.

Lingering Questions. What should be done with students who have failed? How else might this instructional void be filled?

Suggested Actions. As outlined in Chapter 8, there is an urgent need for a reimagined form of “intervention” or, what I call *supplementary instructional support* delivered through the general education program. Several benefits could result from disentangling intervention from special education. First, it would help reduce the conflation of low academic performance with disability—a long standing and harmful stereotype that frames disabled people as inherently deficient and incapable of academic success. Second, it would lessen the imposition of a disability label that can occur when special education is the only available pathway for supplementary instructional support. Additionally, it would allow “special education” itself to be reconfigured. Specifically, it could shift away from the traditional medical model orientation of fixing or curing, towards one centered on access and inclusion. Such a vision would align with the broader aims of the disability justice movement.

A Way to Justify Meeting the Student in Their Zone of Proximal Development

As described in Chapter 7, several participants initiated Modified IEPs so that they could reduce the pressure on an overwhelmed and frustrated student. This was achieved by “meeting the student where they were at” and then scaffolding them forward through differentiated instruction—practices of the “good teacher.” The function of a Modified IEP in these cases was to obtain permission to adjust curricular expectations. Yet, different participants had different thresholds for how much of the standard curriculum could be excluded, altered, or reduced without compromising the OCT ethical standard of integrity. This question has loomed unanswered since the introduction of a province-wide curriculum and the curriculum modification policy in the late 1990s.

Lingering Questions. How much of the elementary curriculum must be covered and achieved before modification is considered necessary? Are there specific competencies or skills

that serve as deal-breakers? Does a threshold of 50 percent—which aligns with the conventional passing grade—constitute sufficient mastery? More fundamentally, how much of the curriculum is ever fully covered in practice?

Suggested Actions. Establish curricular benchmarks that clarify what scope of expectations or specific expectations must be met before modification is considered necessary.

A Way to Map Intervention Plans and Document Next Steps for Learning

Similarly, several participants described Modified IEPs as serving as a map for intervention—a tool for documenting the students’ next steps for scaffolded learning for their own records, for transparency with families, or to facilitate transitions to the teachers in the next class, division, or school. However, as illustrated in Chapter 8, this use of curriculum modification rarely results in the delivery of effective intervention. Ultimately, this use case demonstrates how curriculum modifications are being misappropriated to fill a critical void in the education ecosystem: intervention.

Lingering Questions. Is the curriculum designed in a way that facilitates the scaffolding of skills through curriculum modification? What kinds of instructional practices qualify as effective intervention, and how are teachers supported to design and deliver them? What structures ensure that intervention plans are actually implemented, monitored, and revised? What formal structures exist—or should exist—for documenting students’ next steps for learning outside special education frameworks? Are the existing systems effective in serving this purpose? Is mapping intervention the intended function of the curriculum modification policy? If there are multiple understandings of the purpose of curriculum modifications, can this function be effective in achieving its purpose?

Suggested Actions. Fill the intervention vacuum in the education ecosystem so that modifications are not misappropriated to fill this void.

A Way to Give Higher Grades

As demonstrated in Chapter 7, educators sometimes initiate Modified IEPs to avoid the social and emotional consequences of issuing undesired grades. The current system for issuing grades for students on Modified IEPs is a contributing force in this apparatus (Chapter 3). Several participants reported that they used curriculum modifications to build students’ confidence and protect them from the discouragement of repeatedly receiving low grades. Data suggested that this use case may be more prevalent in the primary division and in the subject of

Writing—a possible area for future research. Some participants also reported that their colleagues may use curriculum modification to avoid pressures from families or administrators for the underperformance of a student.

Lingering Questions. Do the benefits of the current grading system outweigh the harms? How does the need for and role of grades change across contexts? How might grading practices be reimaged in primary, junior, and intermediate divisions to decrease the need for Modified IEPs to mitigate their harm?

Suggested Actions. Redesign the grading system for students on Modified IEPs¹¹⁰ so that they are not used to fill this void. But additionally, a fundamental reconfiguration of the evaluation system in elementary education is required to prevent the need for this use of curriculum modification.

A Way to Access Programs or Services

Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 all demonstrated that IEPs are often used to secure access to programs or services—resources that are scarce and therefore triaged. Some participants described pressure to initiate an unnecessary Modified IEP or to exaggerate under-performance on an existing Modified IEP in order to maintain a students' eligibility for an intervention program in which they were thriving. In one case, a student was required an IEP to continue accessing resource withdrawal support for a second term, as per the Board's policy for resource support (Toronto District School Board, 2024b). But because Accommodation-only IEPs were strongly discouraged at the time (Chapter 4), the only way the student could remain eligible for support was through a Modified IEP—something the teacher was trying to avoid given the student's progress within the resource program (Chapter 9). This case illustrates how conflicting IEP policies can inadvertently restrict access to necessary and effective instruction. In another case, a school was reluctant to re-assess a student after they had made substantial gains in the Empower Reading program as doing so would render the student ineligible for a self-contained special education class in the following year—the only available form of intervention in the receiving middle school. Together, these cases highlight how Modified IEPs are being used to secure access to intervention.

¹¹⁰ This grading system may also be very misleading for families—a topic beyond the scope of this dissertation but warranting further investigation, nonetheless.

Lingering Questions. To what extent do existing policies unintentionally incentivize the initiation or continuation of Modified IEPs as a means of securing access to intervention? What ethical tensions arise when teachers must strategically navigate or manipulate policy to preserve access to effective supports for their students? How does scarcity of instruction shape the landscape of IEP decisions?

Suggested Actions. Address conflicting policies that produce the need to initiate “inappropriate” Modified IEPs. Increase the availability of Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions in all settings so that they are available to all who need them, regardless of IEP status.

Directions for Future Research. Investigate which Tier 2 and Tier 3 strategies are available in elementary schools, as well as patterns of access—specifically who receives this support, and who does not.

The six functions of Modified IEPs outlined above underscore the importance of re-examining the intended purpose of the curriculum modification policy, as well as the multiple functions it currently serves. The data in this study consistently showed that different understandings of the purposes of curriculum modifications led to inconsistency both in their initiation and in their enactment. These findings highlight several more lingering questions for further reflection and future research: Do different interpretations of the purposes of curriculum modifications alter student outcomes or the likelihood that modifications are retained over time? Are there sociodemographic or geographic patterns to the different understandings, initiations, enactments and outcomes? Which of these purposes are desirable, which are undesirable? What constitutes the “appropriate” or “inappropriate” use of this policy? Who should decide? How might all of the present functions of curriculum modifications be fulfilled without the same long-term consequences of Modified IEPs? What vacuums need to be filled for this policy to serve its intended purpose? Addressing these questions requires moving beyond technical solutions towards a broader rethinking of the system. Ultimately, these questions invite productive dialogue by advancing an agonistic view of the policy ecology—a view that offers far greater possibilities for action than revisions to the curriculum modification policy alone.

2) Who are Curriculum Modifications for?

The question of who curriculum modifications are for, is inextricably entangled with the purpose of curriculum modifications. Moreover, in practice, these questions are further entwined with questions of who benefits from curriculum modifications, IEPs, and special education more

broadly. As summarized above, and outlined in Chapter 8, Modified IEPs are currently serving as a form of grade-retention, filling the *what-to-do-with-failing-students* policy vacuum. This is due, in part, to the scarcity of instructional supports available outside of special education for addressing student under-performance—leaving classroom teachers with few options beyond their own instructional capacity. This effectively forces many underperforming students into the special education system—a system that often has uneven outcomes based on social locations. Two key dynamics concerning who should be involved with curriculum modifications, IEPs, and special education emerged in this research. Attending to these dynamics will be essential when re-envisioning the purpose of curriculum modifications or when considering policy actions within the ecosystem.

Monolithic Discourses of IEP Harm or Benefit, and the Need for an Agonistic Stance

As outlined in Chapters 4, 7, and 10, the duality of disability (Artiles et al., 2016) combined with the paradox of educational equity (American Educational Research Association, 2016) tend to produce binary assumptions about the benefits and harms of involvement with special education. For some participants, this divide was imagined primarily through disability status, assuming that students with disabilities would benefit, but students whose underperformance stemmed from other forces would not. Others mapped this divide along racial, linguistic, cultural, or socio-economic lines, assuming that students with privileged identities would benefit, and those with historically marginalized social locations would be harmed. These assumptions were often mapped on to involvement with special education, or onto IEPs as a whole, regardless of the type.

These binary assumptions produced several tensions for participants to grapple with. Some felt a strong need to determine if under-performance was caused by disability or another factor—a somewhat impossible separation. Others struggled to navigate which special education decisions would be in the best interest of a student with intersecting identities of disability and another marker of marginalization. In many of these cases, the assumption that special education would be beneficial based on the disability aspect of their identity, outweighed the assumption that it would be harmful based on their other social locations. This determination may, in part, be due to a fear of denying a disabled student their right to special education. It may also be, in part, due to the assumption that special education is effective in supporting disabled students.

The pervasive assumption that special education is inherently beneficial for disabled students requires deeper attention from a more agonistic stance. Recognizing that involvement with special education can produce both negative consequences (e.g., stigma, labeling effects, social ostracization, lowered expectations, and getting “stuck”) and positive effects (e.g., the acquisition of skills, reduced frustration, and a community of peers) enables a fundamental reframing of the question itself. Rather than asking whether involvement with special education is good or bad, an agonistic perspective invites inquiry into under which specific conditions special education produces benefit and harm, and in what proportions. How do these effects shift across social locations, school contexts, and individual student experiences? The pervasive assumption of that special education is beneficial to disabled students obscures the need to critically re-evaluate the system. Given the scarcity of resources reported by nearly every participant in this study, and the resulting triaging of students for access to effective Tier 2 and Tier 3 instructional supports based on ability (Chapter 9), suggest that the benefits for disabled students may not outweigh the harms.

Observable Pattern of Opportunity Hoarding

A second area requiring attention is the pattern of opportunity hoarding described in Chapter 10. Several participants working in mid- or high-SES communities reported experiencing pressure from families who occupy privileged social identities to initiate an IEP for their child—often despite performance at or above grade-level. Although the uneven distribution of benefits and harms of IEPs has been acknowledged in scholarship and in practice (see above), the Board’s remedies for these patterns prioritize reducing the involvement of marginalized students in special education. While this approach may address the disproportional-over representation of some racialized groups within special education, proportional representation will not result in equity if some groups continue to predominantly access benefits while other groups do not. What is needed is research targeting the specific mechanisms that produce benefits (e.g., differing access to effective tier 2 and tier 3 interventions, differential applications of curriculum modifications, access to private intervention supports outside of schools) in comparison to the mechanisms that produce harm, with attention to how these dynamics shift across neighbourhoods and social identities.

Lingering Questions. In what ways might students experience both benefit and harm from Modified IEPs, IEPs more generally, and from involvement in special education in general?

3) When Should Curriculum Modifications be Initiated?

Closely related to the diverging functions of Modified IEPs, are diverging understandings of when they should be initiated. This analysis highlights a key area for attention and action within the broader policy ecology: the confusion between below grade-level and below provincial standard. As demonstrated in Chapter 5, there is a critical policy vacuum in the ecosystem that has produced wide-spread confusion over when curriculum modifications should be initiated. While most participants agreed that a Modified IEP should be initiated if the student is performing below grade-level, their interpretations of the meaning of “below grade-level” varied considerably. Several participants reported initiating curriculum modifications if the student had failed the grade as indicated by an R on the report card. Others reported initiating modifications if the student was performing at a C level. This latter perspective was informed by language in *Growing Success* (2010) that describes a C as “approaching provincial standard.” This confusion likely accounts for a large proportion of the “inappropriate” Modified IEPs demonstrated in Chapter 4.

Lingering Questions. What is the difference between grade-level and provincial standard? What constitutes a “passing” grade?

Suggested Actions. Clarify what is meant by “the provincial standard.” Develop guidance for when curriculum modifications should be initiated and for what purpose.

Further Research. Are there geographic patterns to the varying interpretations of when to initiate curriculum modifications? If so, could those patterns be explained through patterns of policy interpretation and translation or leadership (i.e., particular sub-districts of the school system)?

4) What Measurement Technologies Should Inform the Decision to Modify?

As demonstrated in Chapter 5, as well as in participant comments throughout this dissertation, report card grades function as a powerful determining force in the decision to initiate curriculum modifications. Yet, there are considerable discrepancies between students’ report card grades and performance on EQAO—two systems that both purport to represent student achievement on the Ontario curriculum. These discrepancies raise questions regarding which assessment technologies, if any, can accurately measure student performance and inform the decision to initiate a Modified IEP. As the analyses in Chapter 5 indicate, some racialized groups were significantly more likely to receive lower report card grades than their EQAO

results. When considered alongside the increased likelihood that students with lower grades than EQAO performance will be placed on “inappropriate” Modified IEPs (Chapter 4), these findings raise serious concerns about the power of report card grades in IEP decisions (Chapter 5), as well as their questionable “validity” as indicators of student ability to access curriculum.

The Over-Reliance on Grades in IEP Decisions

Data in this study suggest that the over-dependence on grades in IEP decisions is entangled with the misappropriation of curriculum modifications as a form of grade retention (Chapter 8). Historically, grade retention was tied to a binary of passing or failing a grade-level, whereas curriculum modification was designed to address access—how a student could meaningfully participate in grade-level content while working towards their individualized goals. As curriculum modifications have been misappropriated to fill the what-to-do-with-failing-students vacuum, so too has the criteria for their initiation filled the when-to-initiate-curriculum-modifications vacuum—creating the understanding that Modified IEPs should be initiated when a student has received a failing grade. This subtle but consequential conflation of failure with inability to access has produced report card grades as one of the most powerful forces in the initiation of Modified IEPs.

Also in the apparatus that produces the privileging of grades over EQAO data, is the awareness of racial inequities embedded in standardized tests, alongside a persistent *under* acknowledgement of the racial inequities embedded in classroom grading practices. As discussed in Chapter 5, in our propensity for binary thinking, the intense, though justified critique of standardized tests may inadvertently position classroom grades as more authentic or accurate than they are. A more agonistic view—one that recognizes that inequities are reproduced by *both* measurement technologies is therefore needed to open space for more informed IEP decisions.

Taken together, the privileging of report card grades over EQAO performance—whether through the entanglement with grade-retention or the dismissal of standardized tests as inequitable and invalid measures—presents a significant equity problem given the questionable validity of report card grades.

Lingering Questions. If report card grades and EQAO performance are both representative of achievement of the Ontario curriculum expectations, how much alignment should be expected between the two technologies? What other forms of assessment should inform the decision to initiate a Modified IEP?

Forces Producing the Questionable Validity of Report Card Grades

There are several forces in the apparatuses of report card grades that produce significant subjectivity and variability in how grades are determined. First, as demonstrated in Chapter 6, a misalignment between curriculum and evaluation policies—a standards vacuum—invited the use of multiple forms of *de facto* standards (e.g., flawed commercial products, locally developed exemplars, unvetted online resources), resulting in wide variation in how student performance was evaluated. Participants also differed in the expectations they emphasized in their evaluations, leading to further inconsistency in judgements of achievement. Many participants described substantial difficulty in reducing students' performance on a wide variety of skills to a single grade. In addition, idiosyncratic conceptualizations of how grade-levels relate to one another (i.e., whether curriculum is sequential or spiraled) shaped divergent understandings of what students should be able to do in each grade. Participants also reported challenges in separating academic performance from behaviour and work completion, particularly when a student was overwhelmed and frustrated. And, as demonstrated in Chapter 7, social-emotional forces also influenced grade determination, including a desire to protect students from the harm of low grades, and to avoid conflicts with families or administrators. Collectively, these constellations of entangled forces create (or constrain) space for implicit biases in the Apparatus of Variability of Grading and Grade-level Determinations. The tracings of these forces therefore reveal several potential areas for action in addressing the racial disproportionality in the misalignment between report card and EQAO documented in Chapter 5.

Suggested Actions. As suggested above, Ontario's evaluation system requires substantial revision—both to reduce the need for teachers to mitigate the harm of grades for struggling students, and to improve the equity and consistency of report card grades. Several actions could support this work: Recognize that different kinds of curriculum expectations (e.g., technical and wholistic) require different forms of evaluation. Consider checklists of mastered skills in addition to achievement levels and reconsider the need to reduce student achievement to a single grade. Provide updated exemplars with every updated curriculum. Ensure that the exemplars represent the wide variety of skills in the curriculum, as well as a wide variety of culturally relevant and responsive assignments used to evaluate them. Provide funding and time for moderated marking, especially in primary and junior divisions where teacher observation and professional judgement

are cornerstones of evaluation practices. Consider a list of banned assessments (e.g., Morrison-McCall Spelling Scale) in addition to a list of permitted assessments.

Areas for Further Research. Are there geographic patterns to the discrepancies between report card grades and EQAO results?

The Intra-actions between Lower Report Card Grades and the Confusion of When to Initiate Modified IEPs

As demonstrated in Chapter 5, the belief that a Modified IEP should be initiated when a student is performing at a C level is particularly dangerous for students whose report card grades are lower than their EQAO performance. The intra-actions at this intersection helped produce the troubling phenomenon of students who achieve B-level performance on EQAO being placed on new “inappropriate” Modified IEPs in the Junior division—a phenomenon that shows evidence of racial disproportionality, especially in Writing (Chapter 4). This specific intra-action is a mechanism for systemic oppression, where biased grading practices transform into long-term educational consequences that disproportionately impact some racialized groups.

Areas for Further Research. How do socio-demographic variables interact with the misalignment of EQAO results and report card grades with the likelihood of an “inappropriate” Modified IEP (i.e. quantitative analysis with multiple cohorts to facilitate models with interaction effects)? Are there geographic patterns to these results?

5) What is the Purpose of Accommodation?

The use of curriculum modification is inseparable from both accommodation and instruction as these practices operate relationally. When accommodations increase, the need for modifications often decreases. But, when skills are accommodated, the provision of instruction for those skills decreases, thereby increasing the need for modifications. This creates a circular dynamic in which the use of accommodation may inadvertently deepen the vary skill gaps that make modification necessary. These practices also operate contextually, insofar as what constitutes an accommodation in one context may be a modification in another (Chapter 8). Yet, the tidy definitions of accommodation and modification offered in most policy documents drastically oversimplify these complex dynamics and omit the central role of instruction within this entanglement. While most participants could accurately describe the theoretical difference between accommodations and modifications, they demonstrated how the entanglement of these concepts made them difficult to put into practice. Several findings related to the entanglement of

accommodations and modifications emerged in the focus groups and interviews, pointing to three key areas for further reflection and research.

Accommodations are also Exemptions

Several participants described the uneven provision of accommodations—most notably for reading and writing skills. While most teachers were eager to provide reading and writing accommodations in subjects like Science or Social Studies, they were more reluctant to provide the same accommodations (e.g., speech-to-text and text-to-speech) during actual Reading and Writing assignments. While this inconsistent provision of accommodations could be read as a denial of a student’s rights, the data suggests a more complex instructional tension: how to determine when a student should be exempted from a particular skill (through accommodation) and when explicit instruction should be provided (through modified, scaffolded goals—an intervention approach to the Modified IEP). Participants acknowledged that accommodating these skills would reduce the need for modifications; however, they were reluctant to accommodate them in Reading and Writing because they genuinely believed in their student’s capacity to learn and develop these skills. This placed teachers in a difficult position, as their professional judgements were in tension with the rights-based discourses that frame accommodations as inherently necessary, benevolent, and expected of the “good teacher.”

The Hierarchy of IEP Supports

Some participants, particularly those in leadership positions, consistently described Modified IEPs as “the last resort” revealing an assumed hierarchy of supports in which modification was viewed as a more intensive or extreme step than accommodation. This may reflect a greater awareness among participants in leadership positions of the potential long-term consequences associated with Modified IEPs compared to classroom teacher participants (Chapter 7). However, it may also indicate a *lesser* awareness of the consequences of accommodations—consequences that teacher participants were facing in their daily practices. As the teacher participants demonstrated, accommodations can essentially exempt students from developing a skill, a decision that can also carry long-term consequences. While the exemption of a specific skill may be entirely appropriate for some students, the positioning of accommodations as the least intrusive strategy for all students with IEPs may be conceptually flawed.

Accommodations are Misunderstood as a Type of Intervention

Like curriculum modifications, data in this study revealed that accommodations are also misunderstood as a form of intervention and consequently misused to fill the intervention void. Comments about accommodations “not working” suggest an underlying assumption that providing an accommodation (e.g., text-to-speech, speech-to-text) will lead to the development of the missing skill (Chapter 8). The ongoing confusion about the purpose of accommodations may be shaped, in part, by their persistent conflation with modifications in academic literature and the contradictory meanings of the terms across jurisdictions (Chapter 3). However, it may also stem from oversimplified definitions in policy artifacts that obscure the relational and contextual dynamics of accommodation and modification practices and, crucially, omit the role of intervention in the dynamic altogether. Consequently, just as curriculum modification requires a clearer articulation of its intended purpose, so too does accommodation.

Lingering Questions. Should modifications—ostensibly a form of partial instruction, or scaffolding towards a skill—be considered the “last resort” if the accommodation exempts a student from learning a skill completely? How does this change in different contexts? By grade-levels? By disability type? By student profile? How do we decide who has the potential to acquire a skill with supplementary instructional support and who should be exempt from it? What methods might facilitate sound decisions for each individual student? How might accommodations be provided in a way that does not effectively exempt the skill development?

Suggested Actions. Redefine accommodation and modification in ways that recognize their contextual dynamics. Provide guidelines for when and why each should be used. Expand the accommodation section of the Ontario IEP template to facilitate the documentation of subject specific accommodations.

6) How Might Intervention be Reimagined?

As described above, the use of curriculum modification is inseparable from the provision of intervention. Many participants believed that with adequate access to effective intervention their student would no longer need modifications. That, for some students, the need for modifications or the specific goals outlined in the Modified IEP were not a reflection of the student’s inability to acquire grade-level skills, but rather a reflection of the teacher’s inability to help them reach them given the context of the classroom and resource support program in the school. In other words, in many cases, the need for Modified IEPs was produced because there

was no way to provide instruction to close the learning gaps. Building on previous discussions about the role of intervention in the curriculum modification ecosystem presented in the sections above, four additional areas for reflection on intervention are outlined below.

The Limits of DI and UDL

Although frameworks like Differentiated Instruction (DI) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are essential for inclusive education, data in this study revealed two important areas for reflection and reconsideration. First, there is a common misconception that DI and UDL are strategies in and of themselves. They are not; rather, they are methods of *delivering* different strategies to different students or making specific strategies available to all students. These strategies may include accommodations, modifications, Tier 2, and Tier 3 interventions, or “just good teaching practices” more generally. As illustrated in Chapter 7, common discourses of DI and UDL suggest that simply employing DI and UDL will resolve student under-performance. This faulty logic obscures the fact that it is *what is delivered through DI and UDL that matters*. Second, some students require Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports—targeted evidence-based instructional interventions. However, data in this study revealed that there are structural limits to what a single educator can feasibly provide on their own amid large class sizes and competing needs of students, even when employing DI and UDL with high fidelity (Chapter 9).

Questions for Further Research. What Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions are being offered within mainstream classrooms and delivered by classroom teachers? Under what conditions are these interventions effective?

Access to Intervention in Schools is Extremely Limited

Nearly every single participant in this study described the scarcity of supplementary instructional support in their schools. As outlined in Chapter 9, the forces that constrained access to these supports included: limited allocations of resource teachers, fractional vice-principal positions being combined with resource positions resulting in the frequent cancellation of instructional periods, resource program models that prioritize work-completion over intervention (often the result of inadequate staffing relative to the demand in the school), push-in support models that prioritize work-completion because of the busy, noisy environment, and the delivery of intervention programs with limited spaces.

Questions for Further Research. What Tier 2 and 3 interventions are being provided outside of mainstream classrooms in elementary schools? How are they delivered? What subjects are covered? Under what conditions are these interventions effective?

There is Evidence of Stratified Access to Intervention

Data in this study suggested evidence of stratified access to intervention both *between* schools based on neighbourhood socio-economic status and consequently, *within* schools based on perceived ability of students (Chapter 9). These suggested patterns are another indication that access to Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions are an important area for further investigation. While participants across all schools reported that the demand for resource support surpassed their supply, schools in higher SES neighbourhood seemed to have more capacity to provide access to intervention for students performing at a C level, whereas participants in schools in lower SES neighbourhoods seemed to accept C level performance as standard and face greater pressure to identify only the most “capable” or “fixable” students performing below C level for resource support. This triaging of students reflects a neoliberal value of maximizing the return on investment, reinforcing the association of human value with productivity—a coupling that has oppressed disabled people for centuries. It also reifies a disability hierarchy that privileges bodies and minds that align with dominant norms, further marginalizing those who do not fit this standard. This indicates that even special education, a system ostensibly designed to support disabled students, still often excluded them based on ability. In other words, disabled students are deprioritized in the very system designed to help them. This ultimately raises the question, who is special education for?

Questions for Future Research. The suggested pattern of stratified access across socio-economic status of neighbourhoods requires further research with particular attention to how the entangled forces of Modified IEPs as a de facto form of grade-retention (Chapter 8), and the privatization of special education interventions (Chapter 9) shift the dynamics of supply and demand of resource support in schools. What is the ratio of supply and demand for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions in elementary schools? What are the geographic and socio-demographic patterns of the supply to demand ratios? What forces (e.g., the functions of Modified IEPs, understandings of when to modify, practices of grade-retention, privatization of intervention support) shape those patterns? Who has access to Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions in schools? Who does not?

Suggested Actions. Increase allocations of resource teachers. Do not permit fractional Resource Teacher positions to be combined with fractional vice-principal positions.

The Provision of Intervention within Special Education is Problematic

When the only avenue for supplementary instructional support is provided through special education, several serious issues ensue. First, it reinforces the presumption that the presence of disability causes low academic performance. This long-standing stereotype frames disabled people as inherently deficient and incapable of academic success when, in reality, many disabled and/or neurodivergent students do not need remediation, only access and inclusion.

Second, this arrangement perpetuates the “fixing” and “curing” ideologies of the medical model of disability that have dominated special education for too long. There is a subtle but important distinction between remediating disability and remediating low school performance. When the two are conflated, disability is miscast as the cause of underperformance, erasing other barriers to school success. This conflation also traps special education within the medical model’s paradigm, preventing it from fully prioritizing the principles of access and inclusion articulated in Disability Studies in Education (DSE) scholarship.

Third, as special education is closely associated with disability, access to intervention may depend on who is willing and able to accept the marked identity of disability. As explained in Chapter 10 and summarized above, this reflects the duality of a disability identity: a label that can offer protection but can also produce marginalization. Crucially, the extent to which disability operates as a protective or marginalizing force can be shaped by students’ other social locations including race, class, language, and other intersecting identities.

Finally, placing all students needing remediation within special education overburdens an already resource-strained system. Data in this study revealed that the scarcity of school-based intervention supports led to the triaging of students—traging that prioritized more “fixable” students leaving those with more significant disability neglected within the very system that purported to support them.

Collectively, these findings relating to intervention models demonstrate that although intervention supports are indispensable within public schools, their placement within special education departments produces a range of problematic consequences. Moreover, as outlined in Chapter 8, any reimagined intervention model must contend with the painful histories of intervention and remediation through therapies, surgeries, and educational “treatment” that were

often imposed on disabled and neurodivergent people. For this reason, future intervention models—even one delivered outside of the realm of special education—must be firmly grounded in DSE principles of dignity, dialogue, justice, and consent.

Lingering Questions. How might intervention programs be destigmatized? How might students be included in their educational decisions? What are the parameters for children providing consent? How do we judge when to pause or end a program if it is causing distress?

7) Who is Responsible for the Proliferation of Modified IEPs?

One explanation for the over-use of Modified IEPs emerged repeatedly throughout this study—one that situates responsibility squarely with classroom teachers, invoking discourses of the “bad teacher” as the primary cause of inappropriate or excessive IEP initiation (Chapter 7). This narrative seemed to fuel both policy and professional development agendas that emphasized improving pedagogy as the primary remedy for reducing the number of IEPs. However, while strengthening instructional practice is undeniably important, this partial explanation obscures other forces that require attention and creates impossible standards for “good teachers” to achieve.

Assigning responsibility of the problem to individual teachers obscures the far more consequential structural factors that shape the initiation of Modified IEPs. Grading practices, curriculum design, policy vacuums, ill-defined terms, misaligned evaluation systems, family pressures, and lack of access to Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports all play pivotal roles in producing the conditions in which curriculum modifications become the default response to student need. Discourses of the “bad teacher” also obscure how practices of the “good teacher”—meeting students in their zone of proximal development, protecting students from the discouragement of low grades, documenting next steps for learning to facilitate transitions—also contribute to the proliferation of Modified IEPs. Addressing these mechanisms requires as much attention as addressing improvement to pedagogy.

Framing IEP overuse as a matter of teacher quality has several additional consequences. First, judgement of a student’s need for curriculum modifications becomes entangled with evaluations of teacher competence, making IEP gatekeepers’ judgements of teacher quality a subtle yet powerful force in the apparatus. Second, discourses that link the need for IEPs to poor pedagogy produce an inverse expectation: that good teachers do not have any failing students. In a context where teachers are expected to meet the needs of all learners without adequate systemic

support, these discourses produce an impossible standard for the profession—one that may contribute to rising phenomenon of teacher attrition (Chapter 9).

Lingering Questions. How might a more agonistic view of the problem of Modified IEPs be facilitated?

Directions for Further Research. Investigate the suggested connection between lack of instructional support, pressures for teachers to do better, and teacher attrition.

Summary of Empirical Contributions

This dissertation makes several empirical contributions to the special education literature, particularly in the areas of IEPs, curriculum modifications, disproportionality, and special education equity. It is among the first studies to disaggregate Accommodation-only and Modified IEPs which is essential in revealing the stratified patterns of access, benefit, and harm that are obscured by aggregated IEP data. This study is also among the first to identify patterns of opportunity hoarding within special education. This finding has significant implications for how inequities can be understood and responded to. Additionally, this study reveals how the scarcity of resources produces a phenomenon whereby disabled students are deprioritized within the very system meant to serve them.

This dissertation also demonstrates that the initiation of a Modified IEP is not an objective reflection of student need but rather produced through a complex apparatus. By destabilizing several common assumptions along the curriculum modification policy chain—including assumptions that there is a stable policy purpose, that there are stable criteria for initiation, that there are objective measures of student performance, and that the policy is triggered by under-performance—this dissertation reveals that the production of Modified IEPs cannot be attributed to any single cause and therefore, cannot be addressed by any single remedy. Policy scholar Tess Lea writes, “when we decentralize where policy is acting, we decentralize where we can act on policy” (Lea, 2024, p. 15). The problems presented throughout this dissertation are produced through hundreds of entangled forces, including curriculum design, evaluation practices, and the scarcity of intervention supports. Yet, before any changes are introduced to the policy ecology, a wholistic strategic plan—one produced through productive dialogue with people from diverse perspectives—is needed to create a shared vision for a more effective and equitable education landscape. By mapping the curriculum modification ecosystem while honouring its complexity, I reveal multiple sites for further exploration, productive

dialogue, and policy action, provoking several important questions, including what is special education and who is it for?

11.2 - Methodological Contributions

This dissertation is one of the few empirical applications of diffractive analysis across disciplines and one of the very few in education research. Although Barad's agential realism has generated considerable theoretical interest across the social sciences and humanities, empirical applications of diffractive analysis remain rare. This gap presents significant challenges for researchers who, like me, are using the method for the first time with very few models to follow. This dissertation begins to address this gap by offering several examples of how moments of diffractive analysis work in conjunction with conventional analyses. I hope that this work can serve as a practical demonstration of what diffractive analysis looks like when applied to complex systemic problems—one that researchers working with a Baradian framework may find useful.

This work also demonstrates several significant affordances that a diffractive analysis can offer education and policy scholars. Importantly, diffractive analysis is a methodology capable of answering the call to complexity. Scholars across three fields—education policy reform, disproportionality, and depolarization—have called for frameworks that move beyond linear, reductive accounts of problems and embrace the complexity of issues. For example, disproportionality researchers have described problems of over- and under- representation of students involved with special education as being “multiply determined,” arguing that remedies “will need to be responsive to local variations that may determine over- or underrepresentation” (Skiba et al., 2016, pp. 223–224). Similarly, education reform scholarship cautions that policy failures cannot be addressed through simple revisions to isolated policies because policy operates within broader systems that shape, enable and constrain their enactment (Ball et al., 2012; Eisner, 1992; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). Additionally, some scholars in political theory have suggested that embracing complexity can be an antidote to antagonistic and dichotomous thinking (Gheorghe, 2022), and to help resist the polarization of debated issues (Inglis & Steele, 2005)—one of my key concerns in conducting this research. This dissertation demonstrates that diffractive analysis is a methodology capable of producing the kind of relational, multiply determined accounts that these fields have called for.

11.3 - Theoretical Contributions

A key affordance of a diffractive methodology is its ability to destabilize taken-for-granted assumptions and use them to generate new insights. In this study, that feature helped produce several significant theoretical contributions in the fields of special education, policy studies, and disability studies.

Destabilizing Dominant Assumptions in Special Education

This dissertation destabilizes several dominant assumptions in the field of special education, including the assumptions that accommodations are unambiguously benevolent; modifications are appropriately used only as a last resort; bad teacher discourses are sufficient accounts of curriculum modification decisions; and proportionality is an indicator of equity. Destabilizing these assumptions is a significant theoretical contribution because collectively, they naturalize practices that produce harm. Troubling these assumptions creates opportunities for more productive and agonistic dialogue about the future of special education.

Another key assumption destabilized through this project is that disability predominantly shapes teachers' understanding of IEP and modification processes. Contrary to what might be expected, disability did not function as the primary lens through which teachers explained IEP and modification decisions. Teachers often invoked performance levels, behaviour, and access to opportunities more than disability status when explaining modification decisions. This is a significant theoretical finding because it destabilizes the premise that special education in the Board exists to identify and respond to disability.

When disability discourses were invoked in IEP decisions, they operated unevenly. In this sense, disability does shape teachers' understandings of IEP process, but not consistently. While some teachers drew from deficit-laden framings of their student's potential, many demonstrated an unwavering belief in their student's capacity to learn—an orientation characteristic of inclusive teaching. However, while several participants spoke highly of their student's ability to learn, they also recognized and accepted that their learning may need additional instruction or a different kind of instruction. Yet, when these teachers advocated for that support, their calls were often reframed as evidence of medical model deficit thinking—practices of an exclusionary teacher. This reframing functions as a form of gaslighting: teachers who demonstrate the most inclusive orientations toward disability are penalized for recognizing what the system refuses to provide. As a result, the institutional discourse of the “good teacher” requires a form of *disability*

evasiveness (K. Barron et al., 2025)—a phenomenon whereby nondisabled people claim to “not notice” disability—in this context, it manifests as an expectation that all students can be equally served through “good teaching” alone. This approach effectively forecloses resource allocation in general education by reframing legitimate advocacy as ableism. Meanwhile, the Modified IEP enacts a more deficit-oriented response by permanently lowering expectations.

In other words, disability is simultaneously evaded and invoked in the curriculum modification apparatus. It is evaded on a basis of resource allocation but invoked as a justification for lowered expectations. This paradox is a theoretical contribution to the field of DSE, particularly for understanding how ableism operates in inclusive education settings. It redirects attention away from individual teacher attitudes and exposes the institutional conditions that produce contradictory responses to disability.

Extending Existing Frameworks

This dissertation introduces several new concepts that extend existing frameworks for understanding policy. For example, the concept of a *covert policy* offers new vocabulary for understanding how policies are secretly mobilized within institutions without accompanying texts that can be used to hold the institution accountable—a phenomenon that was evident in the Board’s informal translation and interpretation of the curriculum modification policy.

This dissertation also extends Honig's concept of the dilemmatic space by reconfiguring it through agential realism to produce the concept of a *Dilemmatic Apparatus*. This builds on Honig’s work by decentralizing human agency and highlighting the power of the non-human forces entangled in what appear to be “decisions.” In this study this move helped highlight the “no-choice reality” of initiating Modified IEPs that many educators in this study described.

Policy Ecology Theory

The adoption of policy ecology as a theoretical frame provided a metaphorical space in which entities could be visualized in the system. Visualizing the “space” helped facilitate my understanding of how the numerous relational forces were intra-acting to produce the phenomenon of Modified IEPs. Using a more post-structuralist approach to policy ecology than what Weaver-Hightower (2008) might have intended, this metaphorical space was able to accommodate forces such as tensions, flows, voids, dilemmas, and perceptions—entities that did not fit so neatly into the discrete analytic categories of enactment theory. Ultimately, this theoretical frame was able to handle the complexity produced through the agential realist

ontology and diffractive analysis, resulting in the multilayered and nuanced analysis presented in this dissertation.

The policy ecology framework offers another benefit to policy research: not only does it highlight the complexity of how policy problems are produced, it also illuminates the equally complex sites where meaningful action can occur. As Lea (2024) writes, “a policy ecology approach may assist to both size and seize distributed tools for activating change by decentralizing where policy is seen to be acting and thus where it might be acted upon” (p. 5). This is particularly important for curriculum modifications where remedies will not be found within the curriculum modification policy alone, but rather across multiple regions of the education ecosystem. One participant captured this need succinctly:

There's a lot of layers to this, and we're sort of trying to tackle some of them without looking at it wholistically-- at the whole thing... I often think to myself that we are a VCR, and everybody's moved on to smartphones. The model-- the way we deliver [support], it's outdated. And there's a lot of fissures and a lot of layers to this where students are, um, frankly-- just aren't being served. (Victor, Administrator)

Policy ecology offers not only a more comprehensive account of the problems but also a broader, more generative map of where meaningful adjustments can occur.

But, as many critical policy scholars have noted, the introduction of any new policy—even those intended to remedy policy problems—may produce unintended consequences. Here, the ecology metaphor offers an additional benefit: a reminder that policy actions will generate ripple effects throughout the delicate ecosystem. As Weaver-Hightower (2008) writes,

Viewing the policy domain as an ecology reveals two seemingly contradictory principles. On the one hand, policy ecologies are in delicate, temporary balance (or are moving in that direction), and one change in one facet of the ecosystem can have consequences for the entire ecosystem...On the other hand, almost paradoxically, it is difficult to make wholesale, directed changes in an ecosystem without intervention at many points... Nearly any educational reform, then, involves acceptance and action by many actors at many levels. (p. 162)

In this sense, the ecology metaphor invites a posture of humility and care, reminding policymakers that meaningful change requires thoughtful intervention across many interconnected sites—yet another area of compatibility with Barad’s (2007) *ethico-onto-epistemology*.

Revisiting Enactment Theory

Enactment theory was helpful in facilitating the initial stages of this project. It informed my research questions, guided the development of my interview and focus group questions, and provided me with several concepts to use as a priori codes. However, when it came time to organize and represent the complicated dynamics of the forces in the ecosystem, I encountered ontological limitations that could not be reconciled with the patterns observed in the data. Although I continued to work with many concepts from enactment theory (e.g., enactment, interpretation, policy actors), I chose to reconfigure policy ecology for my primary theoretical framework because of its post-structural orientation and metaphorical flexibility. In this section, I revisit enactment theory, considering how this study's findings can confirm, complicate, and extend it.

The findings in this dissertation strongly align with many aspects of enactment theory: that policy enactment is context-specific and produced by a variety of material factors (i.e., intervention scarcity, class sizes, teacher ideologies, staffing models, administrator ideologies, school culture), discursive factors (i.e., good teacher and bad teacher discourses, neoliberal logics), and interpretive factors (i.e., policy gaps, de facto policies, different interpretations of curriculum modifications, policy resisters, policy careerists). As enactment theory stipulates, none of these categories is sufficient on their own to explain policy enactment. Although Ball and colleagues (2012) do not explicitly name all of the same components I identified in this study (e.g., the discourse of accommodations as benevolent supports) the broad categories are there. However, the data from this study also simultaneously complicate these categories.

In practice, the material, discursive, and interpretive factors could not be separated. Every force I encountered was simultaneously all three. For example, student performance—the premise of curriculum modification initiation—is part of the material context because it is materially produced through assessment tools, part of the discursive context because it is constructed through educators' conceptualizations of achievement levels and grade-levels, and part of the interpretive context because it is interpreted through a construct of what is “below grade-level.” The “two R” covert policy is another example of a force that is simultaneously all three categories. It is a material threshold for the policy, a discourse of a legitimate “need” for a Modified IEP, and an interpretation of a policy vacuum. These two examples illustrate the first ontological constraint—a constraint that Ball and colleagues also struggled with.

The second ontological constraint of enactment theory is in how the relationships among the factors are conceptualized. In enactment theory, the material, discursive and interpretive contexts are presented as factors that shape enactment. Informed by actor network theory, Ball and colleagues (2012) conceive of these factors flowing unidirectionally toward enactment in a causal relationship. In this study, I observed more co-constitutive relationships. For example, intervention scarcity produces Modified IEPs—without supplementary instructional support, a Modified IEP becomes the only option. But Modified IEPs also produce intervention scarcity—once a student is on a Modified IEP, the pressure to provide intervention is reduced because the system has already responded. Again, Ball and colleagues (2012) themselves anticipated this critique. They write, “you may want to take issue with our unidirectional arrows and think of some crucial elements that we have failed to consider” (p. 144). This invitation suggests that the authors recognized the ontological constraints of their “very tentative synthesis” (p. 141). In this sense, the present study takes up this invitation.

By reading enactment theory through agential realism, the unidirectional arrows can be replaced with a conception of co-constitutive intra-actions, and the discrete categories of material, discursive, and interpretive can be understood as entangled co-constitutive forces that produce one another alongside the phenomenon of policy enactment. While theorizing about how enactment theory to be reconfigured for a relational ontology was beyond the scope of this project, I believe this could be a rich area for future scholarship.

11.4 - Toward an Agonistic Policy Analysis

Although this dissertation draws deeply on the customs and insights of Critical Policy Analysis (CPA), as suggested in Chapter 2, several features of the methodology position it more accurately as a post-critical policy analysis. This distinction is not a rejection of critical scholarship, but rather an extension of it—an attempt to honour its commitment to justice while also responding to the long-standing critiques of its epistemological roots, and tendencies towards binaries and polarization.

CPA has offered indispensable tools for unsettling traditional policy analysis and exposing inequity by tracing power in the seemingly neutral logics of schooling. It has revealed how education policy can be complicit in reproducing stratification, exclusion, and injustice. In this way, CPA remains, “so useful to you that you cannot speak another way (Spivak, 1989, pp. 135, 151)” (in Lather, 1993, p. 120). But as Lather argues,

If deconstruction is about probing the limits of what we cannot think without, deconstructing "critical" is as necessary to critical pedagogies as deconstructing "woman" is to any "forwarding" movement of feminism. (p. 131)

While this dissertation was deeply dependent on CPA—there was simply no way to satisfactorily study curriculum modifications, disproportionality, and educational inequities without drawing on critical policy insights—at the same time, several features of the “critical” warrant troubling.

In Chapter 2, I outlined two reasons why this project would be better characterized as a post-critical policy analysis—a not yet established, but perhaps a tentatively emerging field. First, although many critical theories, including CPA, have departed from their roots in critical reason, lingering specters of Enlightenment thinking still pervade. These include the centering of the human, the assumption of discrete entities, the presumption of static or fixed realities, and persistence of binary logics such as right/wrong, human/not human, and oppressor/oppressed. The second reason relates to the messaging of “critique” itself. Critical scholarship often positions itself through opposition. While this can be generative, it can also move quickly into antagonism and moral polarization. In educational policy contexts where scholars, policy makers, and practitioners alike often hold entrenched positions and defensive stances, the oppositional mode of critique, may hinder the possibility of agonistic engagement and productive dialogue. For these reasons, the present research may be better characterized as what Lather (2017) calls a *post-critical* orientation.

A *post-critical* orientation does not abandon critique. Rather, it distributes it more broadly across a wider scope of relational forces. In this study, agential realism, diffractive analysis and policy ecology brought phenomena into focus that might otherwise have evaded conventional analyses, including the messy intra-actions among artifacts, practices, dilemmas, specters, and other material-discursive forces. The emphasis of this post-critical dissertation is therefore not on antagonistic dichotomized positions but rather on *agonistic* understandings of how phenomena are produced, what relational forces matter, and where possibilities for change emerge within the complex ecosystem.

However, categorizing this study as post-critical is in itself fraught, as it risks performing the very move that “post-post” theories reject: the creation of discrete categories, that naming is never neutral, and it risks producing boundaries. Thus, there is a paradox to be navigated in naming this form of policy analysis: from one perspective, names are helpful heuristics. From another perspective, the act of naming reifies discrete boundaries. Accordingly, I wonder if the

name “agonistic policy analysis” might be a term for further consideration in the field of policy analysis. Not only does the word “agonistic” capture the irony of categorizing the ethico-onto-epistemologies that reject the premise of discrete categories, but it centralizes complexity, contradiction, and multiple truths as necessary and productive spaces. Though I cannot continue to theorize this idea here—after all, “a good dissertation is a done dissertation”—I offer this term as an invitation for future discussion.

Final Concluding Thoughts

The failures of Modified IEPs have gone unnoticed for too long. But, as systems theorist Béla Bánáthy reminds us, “getting rid of what is not wanted does not give you what is desired” (in Weaver-Hightower, 2008, p. 82). The analyses presented in this dissertation have attempted to take up the challenge of not merely diagnosing the problems of the present system, but of tracing the complex material-discursive forces that produce them. As scholars across multiple fields continue to call for more complex, relational, and historically situated understandings of educational inequities, I hope this research contributes in some small way to that ongoing effort.

Ultimately, the complex curriculum modification ecosystem requires more than isolated policy tweaks—it demands a deep, systemic shift in how curriculum, evaluation, disability, intervention, learning, and equity are conceptualized and enacted. By centering complexity, embracing agonism, and fostering depolarized dialogue, we can begin the long-overdue work of re-envisioning the IEP system in ways that serve students more justly.

References

- Adams, D. L., & Erevelles, N. (2016). Shadow Play: DisCrit, Dis/respectability, and Carceral Logics. In S. A. Annamma, D. J. Connor, & B. A. Ferri (Eds.), *DisCrit: Disability studies and critical race theory in education*. Teachers College Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2016). *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press Books.
- Alberta. (1995). *Programming for students with special needs*.
- Alberta Education. (2006). *Individualized program planning (IPP): ECS to grade 12*.
<https://archive.org/details/individualizedpr10albe>
- Allen, J. (n.d.). *Wealth inequalities and poverty concentration in Toronto*. School of Cities.
 Retrieved October 22, 2025, from <https://schoolofcities.github.io/neighbourhood-income-toronto-2020/>
- Allen, L. L., Mellon, L. S., Syed, N., Johnson, J. F., & Bernal, A. J. (2024). Neurodiversity-Affirming Applied Behavior Analysis. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-024-00918-0>
- Alphonso, C. (2020, July 6). Ontario to end academic streaming that splits students into applied, academic tracks. *The Globe and Mail*. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-ontario-to-end-academic-streaming-that-splits-students-into-applied/>
- American Educational Research Association (Director). (2016, September 13). *Ed-Talk: The Paradoxes of Equity, Disability, & Race Intersections - Alfredo J. Artiles* [Video recording]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toPKjXbkEhE>
- Annamma, S. A., Connor, D., & Ferri, B. (2013a). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 16(1), 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.730511>
- Annamma, S. A., Connor, D., & Ferri, B. (2013b). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 16(1), 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.730511>
- Annamma, S. A., Connor, D. J., & Ferri, B. A. (2016). Introduction: A truncated genealogy of DisCrit. In D. J. Connor, Beth A. Ferri, & Subini A. Annamma (Eds.), *DisCrit: Disability studies and critical race theory in education*. Teachers College Press.
- Apple, M. W. (2004). *Ideology and Curriculum* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203487563>

- Apple, M. W. (2006). *Educating the “right” way: Markets, standards, God, and inequality* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Arksey, H., & O’Malley, L. (2005). Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8(1), 19–32.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616>
- Artiles, A. J. (2003). Special Education’s Changing Identity: Paradoxes and Dilemmas in Views of Culture and Space. *Harvard Educational Review*, 73(2), 164–202.
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.73.2.j78t573x377j7106>
- Artiles, A. J. (2011). Toward an Interdisciplinary Understanding of Educational Equity and Difference: The Case of the Racialization of Ability. *Educational Researcher*, 40(9), 431–445. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X11429391>
- Artiles, A. J. (2019). Fourteenth Annual Brown Lecture in Education Research: Reenvisioning Equity Research: Disability Identification Disparities as a Case in Point. *Educational Researcher*, 48(6), 325–335. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19871949>
- Artiles, A. J. (2022). Interdisciplinary Notes on the Dual Nature of Disability: Disrupting Ideology–Ontology Circuits in Racial Disparities Research. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 71(1), 133–152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23813377221120106>
- Artiles, A. J., Dorn, S., & Bal, A. (2016). Objects of Protection, Enduring Nodes of Difference: Disability Intersections With “Other” Differences, 1916 to 2016. *Review of Research in Education*, 40(1), 777–820. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X16680606>
- Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E. B., Trent, S. C., Osher, D., & Ortiz, A. (2010). Justifying and explaining disproportionality, 1968–2008: A critique of underlying views of culture. *Exceptional Children*, 76(3), 279–299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440291007600303>
- Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E. B., & Waitoller, F. R. (Eds.). (2011). *Inclusive education: Examining equity on five continents*. Harvard Education Press.
- Au, W. (2022). *Unequal By Design: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003005179>
- Baglieri, S. (2017). Perspectives on disability. In *Disability studies and the inclusive classroom: Critical practices for embracing diversity in education*. Taylor & Francis Group.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york/detail.action?docID=4845439>

- Baglieri, S., & Lalvani, P. (2020). *Undoing Ableism: Teaching About Disability in K-12 Classrooms* (1st edition.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351002868>
- Ball, S. J. (1993). What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes. In *Education Policy and Social Class: The Selected Works of Stephen J. Ball*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203015179>
- Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093022000043065>
- Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., & Braun, A. (2012). *How schools do policy: Policy enactments in secondary schools*. Routledge.
- Barad, K. (1996). Meeting the universe halfway: Realism and social constructivism without contradiction. In L. H. Nelson & J. Nelson (Eds.), *Feminism, Science, and the Philosophy of Science* (pp. 161–194). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-1742-2_9
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics & the Entanglement of Matter & Meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Barron, B. (2006). Interest and Self-Sustained Learning as Catalysts of Development: A Learning Ecology Perspective. *Human Development*, 49(4), 193–224. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26763888>
- Barron, K. (2024). What is known about curriculum modifications? A scoping literature review. *Exceptionality Education International*, 34(2), 36–55. <https://doi.org/10.5206/eei.v34i2.15599>
- Barron, K., Collis, R. B., Richmond, A. J., & Berkel, E. V. (2025). Disability Evasiveness: Disability Representation in AI-Generated Flash Fiction. *Harvard Educational Review*, 95(4), 613–639. <https://doi.org/10.17763/F3W7M9T5K>
- Barron, K., Collis, R., Richmond, A., Marshall, N., Gordon, A., Parekh, G., & Brown, R. S. (2024). Examining the impact of self-contained special education classes on students' academic achievement, social belonging, and engagement in school: A systematic literature review. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v13i3.1161>
- Barron, K., Kim, S., Parekh, G., & Brown, R. S. (2024, April 11). Covert Tracking: Exploring the relationship between elementary IEP strategies and secondary tracking. *Dismantling*

- Racial Injustice and Constructing Educational Possibilities: A Call to Action*. American Education Research Association (AERA).
- Barton, A. C., Drake, C., Perez, J. G., St. Louis, K., & George, M. (2004). Ecologies of Parental Engagement in Urban Education. *Educational Researcher*, 33(4), 3–12.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033004003>
- Basham, J. D., Gardner, J. E., & Smith, S. J. (2020). Measuring the Implementation of UDL in Classrooms and Schools: Initial Field Test Results. *Remedial and Special Education*, 41(4), 231–243. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932520908015>
- Baumgart, D., Brown, L., Pumpian, I., Nisbet, J., Ford, A., Sweet, M., Messina, R., & Schroeder, J. (1982). Principle of Partial Participation and Individualized Adaptations in Educational Programs for Severely Handicapped Students^{1,2}. *Journal of the Association for the Severely Handicapped*, 7(2), 17–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/154079698200700211>
- Beaver, J., & Carter, M. (2006). *DRA2: Developmental Reading Assessment, K-3*. Pearson Education, Inc. <https://www.pearsonassessments.com/en-us/Store/Professional-Assessments/Academic-Learning/Developmental-Reading-Assessment-%7C-Third-Edition/p/100001913>
- Berkshire, J. C., & Schneider, J. (2024). *The Education Wars: A Citizen's Guide and Defense Manual*. The New Press.
- Bibby, T. (2010). *Education—An “Impossible Profession”? : Psychoanalytic Explorations of Learning and Classrooms*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203844458>
- Bischoping, K., & Gazso, A. (2016). *Analyzing talk in the social sciences*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997). Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation. *American Sociological Review*, 62(3), 465. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657316>
- Bottiani, J. H., Kush, J. M., McDaniel, H. L., Pas, E. T., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2023). Are We Moving the Needle on Racial Disproportionality? Measurement Challenges in Evaluating School Discipline Reform. *American Educational Research Journal*, 60(2), 293–329.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312221140026>
- Bourdieu, P. (1973). Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction. In R. Brown (Ed.), *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351018142>

- Bozalek, V., & Zembylas, M. (2017). Diffraction or reflection? Sketching the contours of two methodologies in educational research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30(2), 111–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1201166>
- Brantlinger, E. A. (Ed.). (2005). *Who Benefits From Special Education?: Remediating (Fixing) Other People's Children*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410617309>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022a). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022b). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.
- British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2009). *Individual education planning for students with special needs: A resource guide for teachers*. Government of British Columbia. <https://choiceschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/IEP-Resource-Guide.pdf>
- British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2016). *Special education services: A manual of policies, procedures and guidelines*. Government of British Columbia. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/inclusive/special_ed_policy_manual.pdf
- Britzman, D. (2011). Cultural Myths in the Making of a Teacher: Biography and Social Structure in Teacher Education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(4), 442–457. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.56.4.mv28227614l44u66>
- Broderick, A., & Leonardo, Z. (2016). What a Good Boy: The Deployment and Distribution of “Goodness” as Ideological Property in Schools. In S. A. Annamma, D. J. Connor, & B. A. Ferri (Eds.), *DisCrit: Disability studies and critical race theory in education*. Teachers College Press.
- Brookhart, S. M., Guskey, T. R., Bowers, A. J., McMillan, J. H., Smith, J. K., Smith, L. F., Stevens, M. T., & Welsh, M. E. (2016). A century of grading research: Meaning and value in the most common educational measure. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 803–848. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316672069>
- Brown, H. M., Stahmer, A. C., Dwyer, P., & Rivera, S. (2021). Changing the story: How diagnosticians can support a neurodiversity perspective from the start. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 25(5), 1171–1174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211001012>

- Brown, K. S., Welsh, L. A., Hill, K. H., & Cipko, J. P. (2008). The efficacy of embedding special education instruction in teacher preparation programs in the united states. *Teaching and Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies*, 24(8), 2087–2094. ERIC (61985172; EJ809207). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2008.02.013>
- Brown, R. S., Gallagher-Mackay, K., & Parekh, G. (2020). Redefining risk: Human rights and elementary school factors predicting post-secondary access. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 28, 21–21. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.28.4200>
- Brown, R. S., & Parekh, G. (2013). *Intersection of disability, achievement and equity: A system review of special education in the TDSB* (Nos. 12-13–12). Toronto District School Board.
- Brown, R. S., Zheng, S., Parekh, G., & Barron, K. (2022, September 5). Long-term implications of modifying Grade 8 mathematics curriculum in Ontario, Canada. *Diversity and Inclusion as Challenges for Educational Effectiveness and Improvement*. Conference of the European Association Research in Learning and Instruction SIG 18: Educational Effectiveness and Improvement. <https://ssl.earli.org/SIG18-conference2022#programme>
- Brubaker, D. R., Yoder, C. E., & Brubaker, E. N. (2019). *When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in an Age of Polarization*. Fortress Press.
- Bruner, J. S. (1976). *The Process of Education: Revised Edition* (2 edition). Harvard University Press.
- Bucholtz, M. (2000). The politics of transcription. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32(10), 1439–1465. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(99\)00094-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(99)00094-6)
- Butler. (1987). Task-involving and ego-involving properties of evaluation: Effects of different feedback conditions on motivational perceptions, interest, and performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 79(4), 474–482. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.79.4.474>
- Butler, J. M., & Nasser, K. O. (2020). Effective approaches in reducing reading discrepancy scores between students in general education and special education. *Journal of Special Education Apprenticeship*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.58729/2167-3454.1106>
- Campbell, F. K. (2009). *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230245181>
- Capp, M. J. (2017). The effectiveness of universal design for learning: A meta-analysis of literature between 2013 and 2016. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21(8), 791–807. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2017.1325074>

- Castillo, W., & Babb, N. (2024). Transforming the future of quantitative educational research: A systematic review of enacting quantCrit. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 27(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2023.2248911>
- Cho, H., & Kingston, N. (2013). Why IEP teams assign low performers with mild disabilities to the Alternate Assessment based on Alternate Achievement Standards. *Journal of Special Education*, 47(3), 162–174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466911435416>
- Cho, H., & Kingston, N. (2014). Understanding test-type assignment: Why do special educators make unexpected test-type assignments? *Psychology in the Schools*, 51(8), 866–878. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21783>
- Cho, H., & Kingston, N. (2015). Examining teachers' decisions on test-type assignment for statewide assessments. *The Journal of Special Education*, 49(1), 16–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466913498772>
- Cinelli, C., Forney, A., & Pearl, J. (2024). A Crash Course in Good and Bad Controls. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 53(3), 1071–1104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00491241221099552>
- Clandfield, D., Curtis, B., Galabuzi, G.-E., Gaymes San Vicente, A., Livingstone, D. W., & Smaller, H. (2014). Restacking the deck: Streaming by class, race, and gender in Ontario Schools. *Our Schools/Our Selves, Our Schools, Our Selves*, 23(2).
- ClarenceSmith, J. A. (1981). The Education Amendment Act, 1980. *Ottawa Law Review*, 13.
- Collins, Connor, D., Ferri, B., GALLAGHER, D., & SAMSON, J. F. (2016). Dangerous Assumptions and Unspoken Limitations: A Disability Studies in Education Response to Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, Mattison, Maczuga, Li, and Cook (2015). *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners*, 16(1), 4–16. <https://doi.org/10.56829/2158-396X.16.1.4>
- Collis, R. B. (2023). *Response to From Special Needs to Special Rights: Report from OSSTF/FEESO's Symposium on Inclusive Education* [Unpublished manuscript]. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZOcu1u9sxbdQ38Exp88Msyq4MqmN1G2m/view>
- Connor, D. J. (2017). Who is Responsible for the Racialized Practices Evident within (Special) Education and What Can Be Done to Change Them? *Theory Into Practice*, 56(3), 226–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2017.1336034>

- Connor, D. J. (2019). Why is Special Education So Afraid of Disability Studies? Analyzing Attacks of Disdain and Distortion from Leaders in the Field. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 34(1), Article 1. <https://journal.jctonline.org/index.php/jct/article/view/763>
- Courageous Dialogues. (2022). *Strategies to help overcome polarization*.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139–168.
<https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/uchclf1989&i=143>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th edition). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Cross, L. H., & Frary, R. B. (1999). Hodgepodge grading: Endorsed by students and teachers alike. *Applied Measurement in Education*, 12(1), 53–72.
https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324818ame1201_4
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003115700>
- Cruz, R. A., & Rodl, J. E. (2018). An Integrative Synthesis of Literature on Disproportionality in Special Education. *The Journal of Special Education*, 52(1), 50–63.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466918758707>
- Danforth, S., Taff, S., & Ferguson, P. M. (2006). Place, profession, and program in the history of special education curriculum. In E. A. Brantlinger (Ed.), *Who benefits from special education?: Remediating (fixing) other people's children* (1st ed.). L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (with Banks, J. A.). (2010). *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*. Teachers College Press.
- Davis, L. J. (Ed.). (2017). *Beginning with disability: A primer*. Routledge.
- Dee, A. L. (2010). Preservice teacher application of differentiated instruction. *The Teacher Educator*, 46(1), 53–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730.2010.529987>
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2023). *Critical Race Theory, Fourth Edition: An Introduction*. New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479818297.001.0001>
- Department of Education. (2021). *Individual education plan (IEP) summary [Template]*. Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.
<https://www.gov.nl.ca/education/forms/studentsupport/sdmodel/>

- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2010). *Accommodations for Instruction and Assessment*. Province of New Brunswick.
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2016). *The program planning process: A guide for parents and guardians*. Province of Nova Scotia.
https://studentservices.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/program_planning_en.pdf
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2019). Guidelines and standards: Educational planning for students with diverse learning needs. *Government of New Brunswick*.
- Dewey, J. (1915). *The school and society*. The University of Chicago press.
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001055835>
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience And Education* (Reprint edition). Free Press.
- Diamond, J. B., & Lewis, A. E. (2022). Opportunity Hoarding and the Maintenance of “White” Educational Space. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 66(11), 1470–1489.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211066048>
- Diem, S., Young, M. D., & Sampson, C. (2019). Where Critical Policy Meets the Politics of Education: An Introduction. *Educational Policy*, 33(1), 3–15.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818807317>
- Diem, S., Young, M. D., Welton, A. D., Mansfield, K. C., & Lee, P.-L. (2014). The intellectual landscape of critical policy analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(9), 1068–1090. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.916007>
- Dixon-Román, E. J. (2016). Diffractive Possibilities: Cultural Studies and Quantification. *Transforming Anthropology*, 24(2), 157–167. <https://doi.org/10.1111/traa.12074>
- Dixon-Román, E. J. (2017). *Inheriting possibility: Social reproduction and quantification in education*. Univ Of Minnesota Press.
- Doc. 2: *Morrison-McCall Spelling Scale*. (n.d.). Alicenine.Net. Retrieved September 6, 2025, from <https://professionaldevelopment.alicenine.net/mod/resource/view.php?id=4749>
- Dolmage, J. (2015). Universal Design: Places to Start. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 35(2), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v35i2.4632>
- Dolmage, J. (2017). *Academic ableism: Disability and higher education*. University of Michigan Press.

- Domina, T., Penner, A., & Penner, E. (2017). Categorical inequality: Schools as sorting machines. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 43(1), 311–330. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-060116-053354>
- Dunn, L. M. (1968). Special Education for the Mildly Retarded—Is Much of it Justifiable? *Exceptional Children*, 35(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440296803500101>
- Dwyer, P. (2022). The Neurodiversity Approach(es): What Are They and What Do They Mean for Researchers? *Human Development*, 66(2), 73–92. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000523723>
- Dymock, S., & Nicholson, T. (2017). To what extent does children’s spelling improve as a result of learning words with the look, say, cover, write, check, fix strategy compared with phonological spelling strategies? *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 22(2), 171–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19404158.2017.1398766>
- Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, Pub. L. No. Public Law 94-142 (1975). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-89/pdf/STATUTE-89-Pg773.pdf>
- Education Quality and Accountability Office. (n.d.). *Research*. Retrieved February 13, 2025, from <https://www.eqao.com/research/>
- Eichhorn, M. S. (2016). Haunted by math: The impact of policy and practice on students with math learning disabilities in the transition to post-secondary education in Mumbai, India. *Global Education Review*, 3(3), 75–93. <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/doaj/2325663x/2016/00000003/00000003/art00007>
- Eisner, E. W. (1992). Educational Reform and the Ecology of Schooling. *Teachers College Record*, 93(4), 610–627. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146819209300405>
- Eisner, E. W. (2002). *The educational imagination: On the design and evaluation of school programs* (3rd ed.). Prentice Hall.
- Eizadirad, A. (2019). Fusion of the Ontario Curriculum, The Tyler Rationale, and Eqao Standardized Testing: A Counterproductive Approach to Reducing the Achievement Gap. In *Handbook of Cultural Studies and Education* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 52–65). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351202398-5>
- Ellis, J. (2019). *A class by themselves?: The origins of special education in Toronto and beyond*. University of Toronto Press.

- Ellis, J., & Axelrod, P. (2016). Continuity and change: The many factors in special education policy development in Toronto public schools, 1945 to the present. *Teachers College Record (1970)*, 118(2), 1–42.
- Ellsworth, E. (2010). Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59(3), 297–325.
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.59.3.058342114k266250>
- Epstein, D., & ProPublica. (2017, February 22). When Evidence Says No, but Doctors Say Yes: An Epidemic of Unnecessary Treatment. *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/02/when-evidence-says-no-but-doctors-say-yes/517368/>
- EQAO. (n.d.). *Who We Are*. Wwww.EQAO.Com. Retrieved February 13, 2025, from
<https://www.eqao.com/about-eqao/who-we-are/>
- Erevelles, N. (2005). Understanding curriculum as normalizing text: Disability studies meet curriculum theory. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37(4), 421–439.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0022027032000276970>
- Erevelles, N., Anne, K., & Middleton, R. (2005). How does it feel to be a problem? Race, disability and exclusion in education policy. In E. A. Brantlinger (Ed.), *Who Benefits From Special Education?: Remediating (Fixing) Other People's Children*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410617309>
- Farley, A. N., & Chamberlain, L. M. (2021). The Teachers are Not Alright: A Call for Research and Policy on Teacher Stress and Well-Being. *The New Educator*, 17(3), 305–323.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2021.1939918>
- Ferguson, A. A. (2000). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of black masculinity*. University of Michigan Press.
- Ferguson, D. L., & Baumgart, D. (1991). Partial Participation Revisited. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 16(4), 218–227.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/154079699101600405>
- Ferri, B. A., & Connor, D. J. (2005a). Tools of exclusion: Race, disability, and (re)segregated education. *Teachers College Record*, 107(3), 453–474. APA PsycInfo® (620701743; 2005-02846-002). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9620.2005.00483.x>

- Ferri, B. A., & Connor, D. J. (2005b). Tools of Exclusion: Race, Disability, and (Re)segregated Education. *Teachers College Record*, 107(3), 453–474. APA PsycInfo® (620701743; 2005-02846-002). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9620.2005.00483.x>
- Ferri, B. A., & Connor, D. J. (2010). “I was the special ed. Girl”: Urban working-class young women of colour. *Gender and Education*, 22(1), 105–121. Sociological Abstracts (60352370; 201021671). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250802612688>
- Fields, K., & Fields, B. (2012). *Racecraft: The soul of inequality in American life*. https://www.amazon.ca/Racecraft-Soul-Inequality-American-Life-ebook/dp/B007LCYZCE/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=
- Finnerty, M. S., Jackson, L. B., & Ostergren, R. (2019). Adaptations in general education classrooms for students with severe disabilities: Access, progress assessment, and sustained use. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 44(2), 87–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796919846424>
- Fish, R. E. (2017). The racialized construction of exceptionality: Experimental evidence of race/ethnicity effects on teachers’ interventions. *Social Science Research*, 62(Complete), 317–334. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.08.007>
- Fish, R. E. (2022). Stratified medicalization of schooling difficulties. *Social Science & Medicine*, 305(Complete). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.115039>
- Fish, R. E., Shores, K., & Souto-Maior, J. (2024). A Critical Appraisal of the Evidence on Racial Disproportionality in Special Education. *Educational Researcher*. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/p2u5r>
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2001). Access to the core curriculum: Critical ingredients for student success. *Remedial and Special Education*, 22(3), 148–157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074193250102200303>
- Flynn, S. (2017). Engaging with materialism and material reality: Critical disability studies and economic recession. *Disability & Society*, 32(2), 143–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1284650>
- Flynn, S., & Feely, M. (2023). A New-Materialist Reading of Disability, Senescence, and the Life-Course. *The International Journal of Disability and Social Justice*, 3(3), 99–122. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48755798>

- Frankenberg, E., Siegel-Hawley, G., & Wang, J. (2010). *Choice without Equity: Charter School Segregation and the Need for Civil Rights Standards*. The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA. www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu
- Fransson, G., & Grannäs, J. (2013). Dilemmatic spaces in educational contexts – towards a conceptual framework for dilemmas in teachers work. *Teachers and Teaching*, 19(1), 4–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2013.744195>
- Freire, P. (1968). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (50th Anniversary Edition). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Frey, N. (2005). Retention, Social Promotion, and Academic Redshirting: What Do We Know and Need to Know? *Remedial and Special Education*, 26(6), 332–346. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325050260060401>
- Friend, M., Cook, L., Hurley-Chamberlain, D., & Shamberger, C. (2010). Co-Teaching: An Illustration of the Complexity of Collaboration in Special Education. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 20(1), 9–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474410903535380>
- Gabel, S. L. (Ed.). (2005). *I- Disability studies in education: Readings in theory and method*. P. Lang.
- Gale, T. (2001). Critical policy sociology: Historiography, archaeology and genealogy as methods of policy analysis. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(5), 379–393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930110071002>
- Garcia, N. M., López, N., & Vélez, V. N. (Eds.). (2023). *QuantCrit: An Antiracist Quantitative Approach to Educational Inquiry* (1st edition). Routledge.
- General Comment No. 4: Article 24 (Right to Inclusive Education), CRPD/C/ GC/4 (2016). https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRPD/C/GC/4&Lang=en
- Geva-May, I., Hoffman, D. C., & Muhleisen, J. (2018). Twenty Years of Comparative Policy Analysis: A Survey of the Field and a Discussion of Topics and Methods. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 20(1), 18–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2017.1405618>
- Gheorghe, C. (2022). Decolonization, Polarization, Psychoanalysis, Privilege: Toward a Cosmopolitan and Culturally Intelligent Psychotherapist. *In Analysis*, 6(2), 128–133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.inan.2022.10.002>

- Gillborn, D. (2010). The colour of numbers: Surveys, statistics and deficit-thinking about race and class. *Journal of Education Policy*, 25(2), 253–276.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930903460740>
- Gillborn, D., Warmington, P., & Demack, S. (2018). QuantCrit: Education, policy, ‘Big Data’ and principles for a critical race theory of statistics. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(2), 158–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2017.1377417>
- Glass, D., & Yuill, N. (2024). Social motor synchrony in autism spectrum conditions: A systematic review. *Autism*, 28(7), 1638–1653.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613231213295>
- Goodley, D. (2014). *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising disablism and ableism*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203366974>
- Goodley, D., Lawthom, R., Liddiard, K., & Runswick-Cole, K. (2019). Provocations for Critical Disability Studies. *Disability & Society*, 34(6), 972–997.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2019.1566889>
- Göransson, K., & Nilholm, C. (2014). Conceptual diversities and empirical shortcomings – a critical analysis of research on inclusive education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 29(3), 265–280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2014.933545>
- Gordon, A. F. (2008). *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2nd ed. edition). Univ Of Minnesota Press.
- Gould, S. J. (1996). *The mismeasure of man* (Rev. and expanded ed.). Norton.
- Government of Quebec. (n.d.). *Guide to using the framework for developing individualized education plans (IEPs)*. Retrieved February 8, 2023, from http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/dpse/adaptation_serv_compl/GuideUtili_CanevasPlanInterv_a_1.pdf
- Government of Yukon. (n.d.). *Supports for students with diverse abilities*. Retrieved January 2, 2024, from <https://yukon.ca/en/supports-students-diverse-abilities-or-special-needs>
- Green, E. L. (2019, March 8). DeVos Illegally Delayed Special Education Rule, Judge Says. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/08/us/politics/betsy-devos-special-education.html>

- Greene, J. C., Caracelli, V. J., & Graham, W. F. (1989). Toward a Conceptual Framework for Mixed-Method Evaluation Designs. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 11(3), 255–274. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1163620>
- Guskey, T. R. (2011). Five Obstacles to Grading Reform. *Educational Leadership*, 69(3), 16–21.
- Hall, B. (2015). *Reaching and teaching all students – A model to guide the practice of inclusive education in Nunavut: Final Report of the External Review of Inclusive Education*. Nunavut Legislative Assembly. [https://assembly.nu.ca/sites/default/files/TD%20137-4\(3\)%20EN%20Reaching%20and%20Teaching%20All%20Students-A%20Model%20to%20Guide%20the%20Practice%20of%20Inclusive%20Education%20in%20Nunavut.%20Final%20Report%20of%20the%20External%20Review%20of%20Inclusive%20Education.pdf](https://assembly.nu.ca/sites/default/files/TD%20137-4(3)%20EN%20Reaching%20and%20Teaching%20All%20Students-A%20Model%20to%20Guide%20the%20Practice%20of%20Inclusive%20Education%20in%20Nunavut.%20Final%20Report%20of%20the%20External%20Review%20of%20Inclusive%20Education.pdf)
- Hancock, C. L., Morgan, C. W., & Holly, J. (2021). Counteracting Dysconscious Racism and Ableism Through Fieldwork: Applying DisCrit Classroom Ecology in Early Childhood Personnel Preparation. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 41(1), 45–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121421989797>
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>
- Haraway, D. J. (with Goodeve, T.). (2018). *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203731093>
- Harrison, A. G., & Holmes, A. (2014). Mild Intellectual Disability at the Postsecondary Level: Results of a Survey of Disability Service Offices. *Exceptionality Education International*, 23(1). <https://doi.org/10.5206/eei.v23i1.7702>
- Harrison, A. G., Lovett, B. J., & Gordon, M. (2013). Documenting Disabilities in Postsecondary Settings: Diagnosticians' Understanding of Legal Regulations and Diagnostic Standards. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 28(4), 303–322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0829573513508527>
- Harrison, A. G., & Sparks, R. (2022). Disability Diagnoses: Seven Sins of Clinicians. *Psychological Injury and Law*, 15(3), 268–286. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12207-022-09449-x>

- Hartman, A. (2003). The social production of American identity: Standardized testing reform in the United States. *Socialism and Democracy*, 17(2), 131–164.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300308428369>
- HB05 Study Committee. (2005). *Assessing “students in the gap” in Colorado* (p. 31).
<https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/Presentations/tele11/ColoradoStudy.pdf>
- Hecht, M., & Crowley, K. (2020). Unpacking the Learning Ecosystems Framework: Lessons from the Adaptive Management of Biological Ecosystems. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 29(2), 264–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2019.1693381>
- Hehir, T. (2004). *New Directions in Special Education: Eliminating Ableism in Policy and Practice*. Harvard Education Press.
- Heinemann. (2025). *Instructional Grade-Level Equivalence Chart*. Fountas and Pinnell.Com.
<https://www.fountasandpinnell.com/resourcelibrary/resource?id=270>
- Heumann, J. (with Joiner, K. & Beacon Press). (2020). *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist*. Beacon Press.
- Hibbert, K., & Dean, A. (2025). *Ontario education staffing crisis: Addressing the shortage of certified teachers in ontario classrooms* (p. 17). Council of Ontario Directors of Education.
- Högberg, B., Lindgren, J., Johansson, K., Strandh, M., & Petersen, S. (2021). Consequences of school grading systems on adolescent health: Evidence from a Swedish school reform. *Journal of Education Policy*, 36(1), 84–106.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2019.1686540>
- Honig, B. (1996). Difference, dilemmas, and the politics of home. In S. Benhabib (Ed.), *Democracy and difference: Contesting the boundaries of the political*. Princeton University Press.
- Horror vacui (philosophy). (2025). In *Wikipedia*.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Horror_vacui_\(philosophy\)&oldid=1292868090](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Horror_vacui_(philosophy)&oldid=1292868090)
- Hosmer, D. W., & Lemeshow, S. (2004). *Applied Logistic Regression* (2. Aufl.). Wiley-Interscience.
- Inglis, J., & Steele, M. (2005). Complexity Intelligence and Cultural Coaching: Navigating the Gap Between Our Societal Challenges and Our Capacities. *Integral Review*, 1.

- Jaafar, S. B., & Anderson, S. (2007). Policy Trends and Tensions in Accountability for Educational Management and Services in Canada. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 53(2), 207–227.
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/228595245/abstract/13444FA3C5B04609PQ/1>
- Jackson, A. Y., & Mazzei, L. A. (2022). *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315667768>
- Jang, E. E., & Sinclair, J. (2018). Ontario's educational assessment policy and practice: A double-edged sword? *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 25(6), 655–677. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2017.1329705>
- Janney, R. E., & Snell, M. E. (1997). How teachers include students with moderate and severe disabilities in elementary classes: The means and meaning of inclusion. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 22(3), 159–169.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/154079699702200304>
- Jenkins, J. M., & Weldon, J. (1999). Reflections on Retention and Social Promotion. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 8(3), 308–311.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/105678799900800310>
- Johfre, S. S., & Freese, J. (2021). Reconsidering the reference category. *Sociological Methodology*, 51(2), 253–269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0081175020982632>
- John, P. (2015). Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, Agendas and Instability in American Politics. In M. Lodge, E. C. Page, & S. J. Balla (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Classics in Public Policy and Administration* (p. 0). Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199646135.013.35>
- Jung, L. A. (2007). Writing SMART Objectives and Strategies That Fit the ROUTINE. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 39(4), 54–58.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/004005990703900406>
- Kennedy, B. L. (2018). Deduction, induction, and abduction. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection* (p. Article 8). SAGE Publications.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526416070>
- Khan, A. (1960). The Policy Vacuum and Delinquency. *Federal Probation*, (01).
<https://heinonline->

- org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/HOL/Page?public=true&handle=hein.journals/fedpro24&div=51&start_page=32&collection=journals&set_as_cursor=0&men_tab=srchresults
- Kincheloe, J. L., & McLaren, P. (2011). Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research. In K. Hayes, S. R. Steinberg, & K. Tobin (Eds.), *Key Works in Critical Pedagogy* (pp. 285–326). SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-397-6_23
- Kliebard, H. M. (2004). *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203339985>
- Klingner, J. K., Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E., Harry, B., Zion, S., Tate, W., Zamora Durán, G., & Riley, D. (2005). Addressing the Disproportionate Representation of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in Special Education through Culturally Responsive Educational Systems. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 13, 38. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v13n38.2005>
- Kohn, A. (2020). Forward. In J. Stommel, A. Blackwelder, S. Sackstein, A. Chiaravalli, L. Gibbs, C. Katopodis, C. N. Davidson, C. K. Riesbeck, C. Sorensen-Unruh, G. Chu, M. Schultz-Bergin, J. Kirr, J. Warner, & West Virginia University Press, *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)* (First edition.). West Virginia University Press.
- Kozleski, E. B. (2020). Disrupting What Passes as Inclusive Education: Predicating Educational Equity on Schools Designed for All. *The Educational Forum*, 84(4), 340–355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2020.1801047>
- Kupferstein, H. (2019). Why caregivers discontinue applied behavior analysis (ABA) and choose communication-based autism interventions. *Advances in Autism*, 6(1), 72–80. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AIA-02-2019-0004>
- Kurth, J. A., Rupp, A. L., McQueston, J. A., McCabe, K. M., Johnston, R., & Toews, S. G. (2019). Types of supplementary aids and services for students with significant support needs. *The Journal of Special Education*, 52(4), 208–218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466918791156>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465>

- Ladson-Billings, G. (2003). It's Your World, I'm Just Trying to Explain It: Understanding Our Epistemological and Methodological Challenges. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(1), 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800402239333>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X035007003>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2021). I read you but can you read me? Culturally responsive literacy teaching and learning. *Literacy Today*, 38(5), 20–23. <https://go-gale-com.proxy.library.brocku.ca/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&issn=24117862&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA680602483&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs>
- Lambert, R. (2018). “indefensible, illogical, and unsupported”: Countering deficit mythologies about the potential of students with learning disabilities in mathematics. *Education Sciences*, 8(2), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci8020072>
- Lather, P. (1993). Post-Critical Pedagogies: A Feminist Reading. In *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Lather, P. (2009). Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts toward a Double(d) Science. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 30(1), 222–230. <https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.0.0032>
- Lather, P. (2016). Top Ten+ List: (Re)Thinking Ontology in (Post)Qualitative Research. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 16(2), 125–131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708616634734>
- Lather, P. (2017). *(Post)critical methodologies: The science possible after the critiques : the selected works of Patti Lather*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315619538>
- Lazarus, S. S., Thurlow, M., Ysseldyke, J., & Edwards, L. (2015). An analysis of the rise and fall of the AA-MAS policy. *The Journal of Special Education*, 48(4), 231–242. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466912472237>
- Lea, T. (2024). Policy ecology as concept and method. *Critical Policy Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2024.2370581>
- Leonardo, Z. (2013). *Race frameworks: A multidimensional theory of racism and education*. Teachers College.

- Levinson, B. A. U., Sutton, M., & Winstead, T. (2009). Education Policy as a Practice of Power: Theoretical Tools, Ethnographic Methods, Democratic Options. *Educational Policy*, 23(6), 767–795. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904808320676>
- Lewis, A. E., & Diamond, J. B. (2015). *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools* (1st edition). Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, R. (2022, August). The Real Reason Everyone Seems to Have ADHD These Days | Psychology Today Canada. *Psychology Today*.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/finding-purpose/202208/the-real-reason-everyone-seems-to-have-adhd-these-days>
- Lexia. (2023). *Lexia® Core5® Reading*. Cambium Learning Group.
https://www.lexialearning.com/user_area/content_media/processed/Core5Brochure-Research-ProventoAccelerateLiteracySkillsforStudentsofAllAbilities.pdf
- Lin, P.-Y., & Lin, Y.-C. (2015). Identifying Canadian teacher candidates' needs for training in the use of inclusive classroom assessment. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19(8), 771–786. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.970669>
- Lingard, B. (2003). Where to in gender policy in education after recuperative masculinity politics? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 7(1), 33–56.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110210143626>
- Linton, S. (1998a). *Claiming disability: Knowledge and identity*. NYU Press.
- Linton, S. (1998b). *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York University Press.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york/detail.action?docID=865773>
- Lopez, N., Erwin, C., Binder, M., & Chavez, M. J. (2018). Making the invisible visible: Advancing quantitative methods in higher education using critical race theory and intersectionality. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(2), 180–207.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2017.1375185>
- Lovett, M. W., Frijters, J. C., Steinbach, K. A., De Palma, M., Lacerenza, L., Wolf, M., Sevcik, R. A., & Morris, R. D. (2022). Interpreting comprehension outcomes after multiple-component reading intervention for children and adolescents with reading disabilities. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 100(Complete).
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2022.102224>

- Lovett, M. W., Frijters, J. C., Wolf, M., Steinbach, K. A., Sevcik, R. A., & Morris, R. D. (2017). Early intervention for children at risk for reading disabilities: The impact of grade at intervention and individual differences on intervention outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 109*(7), 889–914. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000181>
- Manitoba Education. (2010). *Student-specific planning: A handbook for developing and implementing individual education plans (IEPs)*. https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/spcedu/iep/pdf/planning/student_specific_planning.pdf
- Marom, L. (2018). Eastern/Western conceptions of the “Good Teacher” and the construction of difference in teacher education. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 46*(2), 167–182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2017.1399982>
- Martin, J. L. (with Torok-Gerard, S. E.). (2019). *Educational Psychology: History, Practice, Research, and the Future* (1st ed.). Praeger. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400644078>
- Mashburn, A. J., & Myers, S. S. (2010). Advancing research on children with speech-language impairment: An introduction to the early childhood longitudinal study—Kindergarten cohort. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 41*(1), 61–69. (61802438; EJ874119). [https://doi.org/10.1044/0161-1461\(2009/08-0037\)](https://doi.org/10.1044/0161-1461(2009/08-0037))
- Mazzei, L. A. (2014). Beyond an Easy Sense: A Diffractive Analysis. *Qualitative Inquiry, 20*(6), 742–746. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414530257>
- McCarthy, A. M., & Christ, T. J. (2010). Test Review: Beaver, J. M., & Carter, M. A. (2006). The Developmental Reading Assessment—Second Edition (DRA2). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson. *Assessment for Effective Intervention, 35*(3), 182–185. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534508410363127>
- McLeod, S., & McKinnon, D. H. (2010). Support required for primary and secondary students with communication disorders and/or other learning needs. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 26*(2), 123–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265659010368754>
- McMillan, J., Myran, S., & Workman, D. (2002). Elementary Teachers’ Classroom Assessment and Grading Practices. *Journal of Educational Research - J EDUC RES, 95*, 203–213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220670209596593>
- Ministry of Education. (2013). *Policy/Program Memorandum 155*. <http://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-155>

- Ministry of Education and Training. (1998). *Guide to the provincial report card, grades 1-8*. Ontario Ministry of Education.
<https://www.angelfire.com/ns/circleofallnations/RCguide.pdf>
- Mitchell, D. (2010). *Education that fits: Review of international trends in the education of students with special education needs* [Final report]. The Hub.
- Mitchell, D. (2015a). *Education that fits: Review of international trends in the education of students with special education needs* (Final Report 2nd ed.). University of Canterbury.
https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/86011/Mitchell-Review-Final.pdf
- Mitchell, D. (2015b). Inclusive Education is a Multi-Faceted Concept. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 5(1), 9–30. <https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.151>
- Mitchell, D., Morton, M., & Hornby, G. (2010). *Review of the literature on Individual Education Plans*. <https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/handle/10092/5766>
- Moor, J. H. (2005). Why We Need Better Ethics for Emerging Technologies. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 7(3), 111–119. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-006-0008-0>
- Moore, A. (2004). *The Good Teacher: Dominant Discourses in Teacher Education*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203420270>
- Moore-Abdool, W. (2010). Included students with Autism and access to general curriculum: What is being provided? *Issues in Teacher Education*, 19(2), 153–169.
<https://www.itejournal.org/wp-content/pdfs-issues/fall-2010/18mooresabdool.pdf>
- Morgan. (2015). *Opinion | Is Special Education Racist? - The New York Times*. New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/24/opinion/is-special-education-racist.html>
- Morgan, P. L., Farkas, G., Hillemeier, M. M., & Maczuga, S. (2017). Replicated Evidence of Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Disability Identification in U.S. Schools. *Educational Researcher*, 46(6), 305–322. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17726282>
- Morgan, P. L., George Farkas, Farkas, G., Marianne M. Hillemeier, Hillemeier, M. M., Richard E. Mattison, Mattison, R. E., Steve Maczuga, Maczuga, S., Hui Li, Li, H., Michael Cook, & Cook, M. (2015). Minorities Are Disproportionately Underrepresented in Special Education: Longitudinal Evidence Across Five Disability Conditions. *Educational Researcher*, 44(5), 278–292. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x15591157>

- Morrison, J. C., & McCall, W. A. (1923). *Morrison-McCall Spelling Scale*. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.
https://professionaldevelopment.alicenine.net/pluginfile.php/19248/mod_resource/content/9/Morrison-McCall_SpellingScaleR.pdf
- Muller, C. J., & MacLehose, R. F. (2014). Estimating predicted probabilities from logistic regression: Different methods correspond to different target populations. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 43(3), 962–970. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyu029>
- Musson, J., Thomas, M., Towles-Reeves, E., & Kearns, J. (2010). An analysis of state alternate assessment participation guidelines. *The Journal of Special Education*, 44(2), 67–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466909333515>
- Naylor, N. (2020, December 1). *New Elementary Report Cards and Update on the Evaluation of Social-Emotional Learning Skills*. Ministry of Education. <https://www.opsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Memo-New-Elementary-Report-Cards-Dec01-20.pdf>
- New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers, & New York State United Teachers. (n.d.). *A guide to academic intervention services*. Retrieved April 28, 2025, from https://www.nysut.org/-/media/files/nysut/resources/2011/april/k12_080317_aisguide01.pdf
- Nilholm, C., & Goransson, K. (2017). What is meant by inclusion? An analysis of European and North American journal articles with high impact. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 32(3), 437–451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1295638>
- Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment. (2006). *Northwest Territories student support plans: Guidelines for development and teacher toolkit*. https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/ece/files/resources/ssp_guidelines_for_development_2006.pdf
- Nunavut Education Act*. (2008).
- O. Reg. 181/98 Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils (1998). <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/980181>
- O. Reg. 554/81 Under Education Act (Special Education Identification Placement and Review Committees and Appeals). (1981).

- Oakes, J. (1990). *Multiplying Inequalities: The Effects of Race, Social Class, and Tracking on Opportunities to Learn Mathematics and Science*. Rand Corp.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED329615>
- Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.
- Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. (2023). *45th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. US Department of Education. <https://files-eric-ed-gov.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/fulltext/ED650593.pdf>
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (2005). The Theoretical Status of the Concept of Race. In C. McCarthy, W. Crichtlow, G. Dimitriadis, & N. Dolby (Eds.), *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education* (pp. 3–12). Routledge.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york/detail.action?docID=1144531>
- Ontario. (1998). *Individual Education Plan (IEP): Resource Guide*.
- Ontario. (2000). *Individual Education Plans*.
- Ontario College of Teachers. (2025). *Ethical Standards*. OCT.Ca.
<https://oct.ca/public/professional-standards/ethical-standards>
- Ontario Department of Education. (1975). *The Formative Years, Circular P.1J1. Provincial Curriculum Policy for the Primary and Junior Divisions of the Public and Separate Schools of Ontario*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED157948.pdf>
- Ontario Department of Education. (1995). *The common curriculum: Policies and outcomes, grades 1-9*.
https://archive.org/details/commoncurriculum00onta_2/page/n1/mode/2up?view=theater
- Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2022). *Right to read* (p. 558) [Inquiry report].
<https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/right-to-read-inquiry-report>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (1984). *Special education information handbook 1984*. Ontario Ministry of Education.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (1997). *Excellence in education: Ontario's plan for reform : better-educated students for a brighter future*. The Ministry.
- Ontario Ministry of Education (Director). (1998). *Implementing Ontario's new curriculum* [Video recording]. Ministry of Education and Training.

- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2001). *Special education: A guide for educators*. Ministry of Education.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2004a). *The individual education plan (IEP): A resource guide*. Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2004b). *The Individual Education Plan (IEP): A resource guide*. Ministry of Education.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2006). *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Language, 2006*.
<https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/language18currb.pdf>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007). *English Language Learners / ESL and ELD Programs and Services: Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12*.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2010). *Growing success: Assessment, evaluation, and reporting in Ontario's schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12*. Government of Ontario.
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/success.html>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *Learning for all – A guide to effective assessment and instruction for all students, Kindergarten to Grade 12, 2013*. Government of Ontario.
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/LearningforAll2013.pdf>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014). *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools – Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation, 2014*. Government of Ontario.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2016). *Ontario Schools: Kindergarten to Grade 12 policy and program requirements*. Government of Ontario.
http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/policy/os/onschools_2016e.pdf
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2017). *Special education in Ontario, Kindergarten to Grade 12: Policy and resource guide*. Government of Ontario.
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/policy/os/2017/SpecEdFinal2018.pdf>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2020). *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1–8: Mathematics, 2020*.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2022a). *Ontario expands access to special education supports* (News Release). <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1001942/ontario-expands-access-to-special-education-supports>

- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2022b, July 19). *Identifying students with special education needs*. Ontario.Ca. <http://www.ontario.ca/page/identifying-students-special-education-needs>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2023). *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1–8: Language, 2023*.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2024, June). *Planning for Students with Special Education Needs* [Considerations for program planning]. New Curriculum and Resources. <https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/planning-for-students-with-special-education-needs>
- Ontario Ministry of Education & Training (Director). (1999). *Evaluating and reporting* [Video recording]. TVOntario.
- Ontario Ministry of Education & TVOntario (Directors). (2000). *Accommodating student special needs* [Video recording]. TVOntario.
- O’Sullivan, B. (1999). Global Change and Educational Reform in Ontario and Canada. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l’éducation*, 24(3), 311–325. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1585878>
- Owens, J. (2022). Double Jeopardy: Teacher Biases, Racialized Organizations, and the Production of Racial/Ethnic Disparities in School Discipline. *American Sociological Review*, 87(6), 1007–1048. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00031224221135810>
- Owings, W., & Kaplan, L. (2001). Standards, Retention, and Social Promotion. *NASSP Bulletin*, 85(629), 57–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019263650108562906>
- Paccaud, A., & Luder, R. (2017). Participation versus individual support: Individual goals and curricular access in inclusive special needs education. *Journal of Cognitive Education and Psychology*, 16(2), 205–224. <http://doi.org/10.1891/1945-8959.16.2.205>
- Panda, E. J., Woehrle, T., Frijters, J. C., Moules, R., Zolis, S., Edwards, E., Steinbach, K. A., De Palma, M., & Lovett, M. W. (2024). Empowering Schools to Implement Effective Research-Based Reading Remediation Delivers Long-Lasting Improvements to Children’s Reading Trajectories. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 57(6), 350–370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222194231215016>
- Parekh, G. (2013a). *Structured pathways: An exploration of programs of study, school-wide and in-school programs, as well as promotion and transference across secondary schools in the Toronto District School Board* (Report No. 13/14-03). Toronto District School Board.

- Parekh, G. (2013b). *Structured pathways: An exploration of programs of study, school-wide, and in-school programs as well as promotion and transference across secondary schools in the Toronto District School Board* (Research Report 13/14-03). Toronto District School Board. <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/research/docs/reports/StructuredPathways.pdf>
- Parekh, G. (2014). *Students' experience of belonging in school* (Fact Sheet No. 1). Toronto District School Board. https://www.academia.edu/10997943/Students_Experiences_of_Belonging_in_School
- Parekh, G. (2020a). How inclusive do we really want to be? In S. Winton & G. Parekh (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on education policy and schools, families, and communities*. Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- Parekh, G. (2020b). *Transformative action towards equity: Strategic remodeling of special education programming to support students' academic and social development*. York University.
- Parekh, G. (2022a). *Ableism in Education: Rethinking School Practices and Policies*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032677965>
- Parekh, G. (2022b). *Ableism in education: Rethinking school practices and policies* (First edition.). W.W. Norton & Company.
- Parekh, G. (2023). Applied Quantitative Inquiry Through a Critical Disability Studies Lens. In M. D. Young & S. Diem (Eds.), *Handbook of Critical Education Research: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Emerging Approaches*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003141464>
- Parekh, G., & Brown, R. S. (2019). Changing lanes: The relationship between special education placement and students' academic futures. *Educational Policy*, 33(1), 111–135. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818812772>
- Parekh, G., & Brown, R. S. (2020). Naming and claiming: The tension between institutional and self-identification of disability. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 9(5), 347–379. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v9i5.701>
- Parekh, G., Flessa, J. J., & Smaller, H. (2016). The Toronto District School Board: A global city school system's structures, processes, and student outcomes. *London Review of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.14.3.06>

- Parent worries assistive technology isn't helping son gain reading skills.* (2021, October 11). [Video recording]. <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1959516739582>
- Park, S. (2024). Reframing Deficit Narratives to Honor the Community Cultural Wealth of Immigrant Families of Children with Disabilities. *Journal of Family Diversity in Education*, 6(1), 27–46. <https://doi.org/10.53956/jfde.2024.186>
- Pasquini, R., & DeLuca, C. (2021). *Grading in a dilemmatic space: An exploratory cross-cultural analysis of mathematics and language secondary teachers.* <https://orfee.hepl.ch/handle/20.500.12162/5004>
- Pearson, P. D. (2004). The Reading Wars. *Educational Policy*, 18(1), 216–252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904803260041>
- Piaget, J. (1954). *The Construction Of Reality In The Child.* Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315009650>
- Picklo, D., & Christenson, S. (2005). Alternatives to Retention and Social Promotion: The Availability of Instructional Options. *Remedial and Special Education*, 26(5), 258–268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325050260050101>
- Pillow, W. S. (2023). Reflexivity 10.6: The Matter of Reflexivity or What Matter Matters in Postqualitative Inquiry. In M. D. Young & S. Diem (Eds.), *Handbook of Critical Education Research: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Emerging Approaches.* Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003141464>
- Posey-Maddox, L., Powell, S. N., Roda, A., Lenhoff, S. W., & Miller, E. O. (2025). Advantaged Families' Opportunity Hoarding in U.S. K–12 Education: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 00346543241304766. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543241304766>
- Powell, S. N. (2020). The paradox of a credit-recovery program: Alleviating and exacerbating racial inequity. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 23(6), 784–799. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2018.1511536>
- PPM8—Teaching students with learning disabilities.pdf.* (2014). <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/ppm8.pdf>
- Price, M., & Kerschbaum, S. L. (2016). Stories of methodology: Interviewing sideways, crooked and crip. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 5(3), 18. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v5i3.295>

- Pricing & Insurance*. (n.d.). Springboard Clinic. Retrieved October 22, 2025, from <https://springboardclinic.com/pricing-insurance/>
- Puar, J. K. (2017). *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Duke University Press Books.
- Pulfrey, C., Buchs, C., & Butera, F. (2011). Why grades engender performance-avoidance goals: The mediating role of autonomous motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 103(3), 683–700. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023911>
- Raphael, D. (1993). Accountability and Educational Philosophy: Paradigms and Conflict in Ontario Education. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'éducation*, 18(1), 29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1494865>
- Raven, S., & Whitman, G. M. (2019). Science in silence: How educators of the Deaf and hard-of-hearing teach science. *Research in Science Education*, 49(4), 1001–1012. ERIC (2461136174; EJ1223034). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11165-019-9847-7>
- Reid, D. K., & Knight, M. G. (2006). Disability justifies exclusion of minority students: A critical history grounded in disability studies. *Educational Researcher*, 35(6), 18–23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3876749>
- Reid, L., Parekh, G., & Lattanzio, R. (2020). A relic of the past: Identification, Placement and Review Committees in Ontario's education system. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, (194), Article 194. <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjeap/article/view/69850>
- Richmond, A. (2024). *In their own words: The voices of disabled first-person protagonists in children's and young adult literature* [York University]. <https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/browse/title?bbm.page=1&startsWith=In%20their%20own>
- Robinson, B. R. (2024, February 8). Shadow Policies: The Controversial 2024 Hybrid Work Trend. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrobinson/2024/02/08/shadow-policies-the-controversial-2024-hybrid-work-trend/>
- Robinson, U. (2018, April). *HSP Parent Letter*. Toronto District School Board. https://schoolweb.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/tomlongboat/docs/HSP%20Parent%20Letter%20-%20English.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

- Rogers, R., Schaenen, I., Schott, C., O'Brien, K., Trigos-Carrillo, L., Starkey, K., & Chasteen, C. C. (2016). Critical discourse analysis in education: A review of the literature, 2004 to 2012. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 1192–1226.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316628993>
- Rosiek, J., Adkins-Cartee, M., Donley, K., & Pratt, A. B. (2024). A Review of Posthumanist Education Research: Expanded Conceptions of Research Possibility and Responsibility. *Review of Research in Education*, 8, 220–247.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X241265332>
- Russell, M. (1998). *Beyond Ramps: Disability at the End of the Social Contract*.
- Sahli Lozano, C., Brandenburg, K., Ganz, A. S., & Wüthrich, S. (2022). Accommodations, modifications, and special education interventions: Influence on teacher expectations. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 27(5–8), 396–419. (2861332788; EJ1373256).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2022.2103571>
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (4th edition). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Salmon, A., Palmer, N., & Terro, W. (2023). *Special Education and Inclusion Annual Report 2022-2023* (Nos. 04-12–4507; p. 12). Toronto District School Board. <https://pub-tdsb.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=15323>
- Salton, Y., Riddle, S., & Baguley, M. (2022). The ‘good’ teacher in an era of professional standards: Policy frameworks and lived realities. *Teachers and Teaching*, 28(1), 51–63.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2021.2017274>
- Sapon-Shevin, M. (2007). *Widening the circle: The power of inclusive classrooms*. Beacon Press.
- Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2015). *Actualizing a needs-based model*. Government of Saskatchewan. <https://publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/33546>
- Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2017a). *Inclusion and intervention plan guidelines*.
<https://publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/90799>
- Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2017b). *The adaptive dimension for Saskatchewan K-12 students*. Government of Saskatchewan.
<https://publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/86567>
- Scheurich, J. J. (2023). Section two introduction: Epistemology, theory, and paradigms. In M. D. Young & S. Diem (Eds.), *Handbook of Critical Education Research: Qualitative*,

- Quantitative, and Emerging Approaches* (pp. 97–102). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003141464>
- Schneider, J., & Hutt, E. (2014). Making the grade: A history of the A–F marking scheme. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 46(2), 201–224.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2013.790480>
- Schneider, J., & Hutt, E. L. (2023). *Off the mark: How grades, ratings, and rankings undermine learning (but don't have to)*. Harvard University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674294776>
- Schoenfeld, A. H. (2004). The Math Wars. *Educational Policy*, 18(1), 253–286.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904803260042>
- Service delivery model forms*. (n.d.). Education. Retrieved January 2, 2024, from
<https://www.gov.nl.ca/education/forms/studentssupport/sdmodel/>
- Shaftel, J., & Rutt, B. T. (2011). Characteristics of students who take an alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 23, 156–167. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207311424909>
- Shah, V., & Sodhi, M. (2025, June 1). Technologies of Silencing: Mechanisms to Stall and Reverse School District Anti-Racist Work. *School Districts and Education Governance*. Canadian Society for Studies in Education.
- Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2011). Conceptualising policy: Technologies of governance and the politics of visibility policy worlds. In C. Shore, S. Write, & D. Però (Eds.), *Policy Worlds: Anthropology and the Analysis of Contemporary Power*. Berghahn Books, Incorporated. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york/detail.action?docID=717899>
- Skiba, R. J., Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E. B., Losen, D. J., & Harry, E. G. (2016). Risks and Consequences of Oversimplifying Educational Inequities: A Response to Morgan et al. (2015). *Educational Researcher*, 45(3), 221–225.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16644606>
- Slavin, R. E. (1999). The Pendulum Revisited: Faddism in Education and Its Alternatives. In *Handbook of Educational Policy*. Academic Press.
- Slee, R. (2013). How do we make inclusive education happen when exclusion is a political predisposition? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(8), 895–907.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2011.602534>

- Solorzano, D. G. (1998). Critical race theory, race and gender microaggressions, and the experience of Chicana and Chicano scholars. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 121–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095183998236926>
- Special Education Part 1*. (2025). OISE Continuing and Professional Learning. <https://cpl.oise.utoronto.ca/course/special-education-part-1/>
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2018). Writing Post Qualitative Inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 24(9), 603–608. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417734567>
- St. Pierre, E. A., & Jackson, A. Y. (2014). Qualitative Data Analysis After Coding. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(6), 715–719. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414532435>
- Stebbins, R. A. (2001). *Exploratory Research in the Social Sciences*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412984249>
- Stoch, S. (2018, October 20). *A parent's guide to IEPs – Tips from an insider*. Camp Kodiak. <https://www.campkodiak.com/a-parents-guide-to-ieps-tips-from-an-insider/>
- Stoltzfus, J. C. (2011). Logistic Regression: A Brief Primer. *Academic Emergency Medicine*, 18(10), 1099–1104. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1553-2712.2011.01185.x>
- Sullivan, A., & Proctor, S. (2016). The shield or the sword?: Revisiting the debate on racial disproportionality in special education and implications for school psychologists. *School Psychology Forum: Research in Practice*.
- Tam, G., & Armson, S. (2022). *Trends in toronto district school board special education data: 2016-2022*. Toronto District School Board. <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/research/docs/reports/SpecialEducation%20in%20TDSB%20-%20Trends2016-2022%20-%20change%20to%20part%203.pdf>
- Tashie, C., Shapiro-Barnard, S., Schuh, M., Jorgensen, C., Dillon, A. D., Dixon, B., Nisbet, J., & Samson, G. (1993). *From special to regular, from ordinary to extraordinary*. University of New Hampshire.
- Tefera, A. A., Artiles, A. J., Kramarczuk Voulgarides, C., Aylward, A., & Alvarado, S. (2023). The Aftermath of Disproportionality Citations: Situating Disability-Race Intersections in Historical, Spatial, and Sociocultural Contexts. *American Educational Research Journal*, 60(2), 367–404. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312221147007>
- Texas Education Agency (TEA). (2023). *Technical Assistance: Individualized Education Program (IEP) Development*. Texas Education Agency.

<https://tea.texas.gov/academics/special-student-populations/special-education/iep-development-2-16-23.pdf>

- The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. (2025, October 21). Significant Disproportionality Reporting Under IDEA. *The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights*. <https://civilrights.org/resource/significant-disproportionality-idea/>
- Theoharis, G., & Causton, J. (2016). “He Won’t Get Anything out of This!” Intersections of Race, Disability, and Access. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 19(1), 40–50. ERIC (1826522045; EJ1090817). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555458915624731>
- Thomas, V. G. (2000). Learner-centered alternatives to social promotion and retention: A talent development approach. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69(4), 323–337. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/222128846/abstract/B6134E41CA70487EPQ/1>
- Thompson, M. (2017). *Introduction: What Is Critical Theory?* (pp. 1–14). https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55801-5_1
- Thousand, J. S., Fox, T. J., Reid, R., Joanne, G., Williams, W., & Fox, W. L. (1986). *The homecoming model: Educating students who present intensive educational challenges within regular education environments* (p. 71). Vermont University. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED284406.pdf>
- Tilly, C. (1998). How To Hoard Opportunities. In *Durable Inequality* (1st ed.). University of California Press.
- Tomlinson, C. A., Brighton, C., Hertberg, H., Callahan, C. M., Moon, T. R., Brimijoin, K., Conover, L. A., & Reynolds, T. (2003). Differentiating Instruction in Response to Student Readiness, Interest, and Learning Profile in Academically Diverse Classrooms: A Review of Literature. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 27(2–3), 119–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016235320302700203>
- Tomlinson, C. Ann. (2014). *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york/detail.action?docID=1709534>
- Toronto District School Board (Director). (n.d.). *Alternative Report Card (ALTRC)* [Video recording]. Retrieved October 4, 2025, from <https://azapps.tdsb.on.ca/ALTRC/video.php>

- Toronto District School Board. (2016). *Toronto District School Board integrated equity framework action plan*.
<https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/161026IntegratedEquity2932.pdf>
- Toronto District School Board. (2019). *Special Education Plan 2019*.
https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/docs/Special_Education/2019TDSBSpecialEducationPlan.pdf
- Toronto District School Board. (2020). *Special Education Plan 2020*.
<https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/docs/SpecialEducationPlan.pdf>
- Toronto District School Board. (2024a). *Special Education Plan 2024-2025*.
https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/docs/Special_Education/Special%20Education%20Plan%202024-2025.pdf
- Toronto District School Board. (2024b, July). *Special Education Plan 2024-2025*.
https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/docs/Special_Education/Special%20Education%20Plan%202024-2025.pdf
- Toronto District School Board. (2025a). *About Us*. Toronto District School Board.
<https://www.tdsb.on.ca/About-Us>
- Toronto District School Board. (2025b, July). *TDSB Special Education Plan 2025-2026*.
<https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/docs/TDSB%20Special%20Education%20Plan%202025-2026.pdf>
- Tranjan, R. (2025, May 23). *Ontario has underfunded schools by \$6.3 billion since 2018—CCPA*. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/news-research/ontario-has-underfunded-schools-by-6-3-billion-since-2018/>
- Tremblay, P., & Belley, S. (2017). Individualized education plans in Canada: A comparative analysis. *International Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education*, 8(1), 3017–3024. <https://doi.org/10.20533/ijcdse.2042.6364.2017.0409>
- Tricco, A. C., Lillie, E., Zarin, W., O'Brien, K. K., Colquhoun, H., Levac, D., Moher, D., Peters, M. D. J., Horsley, T., Weeks, L., Hempel, S., Akl, E. A., Chang, C., McGowan, J., Stewart, L., Hartling, L., Aldcroft, A., Wilson, M. G., Garritty, C., ... Straus, S. E. (2018). PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR): Checklist and Explanation. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 169(7), 467–473. <https://doi.org/10.7326/M18-0850>

- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1).
<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>
- TVOntario & Ontario Ministry of Education (Directors). (1999). *Assessing student performance* [Video recording]. TVOntario.
- Tyler, R. W. (1949). *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (First Edition, Revised). The University of Chicago Press.
- Unger, A., Serry, T., Snow, P. C., & Weadman, T. (2025). The Road to Running Records: A Narrative Review of Their History and a Systematic Narrative Review of the Evidence for Their Use. *Review of Educational Research*, 00346543251348258.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543251348258>
- United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities*.
<https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>
- Vaughan, M., & Henderson, A. (2016). Exceptional educators: A collaborative training partnership for the inclusion of students with Down's Syndrome. *Support for Learning*, 31(1), 46–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12113>
- Vaughn, S., & Fuchs, L. S. (2003). Redefining Learning Disabilities as Inadequate Response to Instruction: The Promise and Potential Problems. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 18(3), 137–146. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-5826.00070>
- Vega, B. E. (2024). Racial conflict in a higher education policy vacuum. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 32. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.32.8296>
- Voulgarides, C. (2018). *Does Compliance Matter in Special Education?: IDEA and the Hidden Inequities of Practice* (1st edition). Teachers College Press.
- Voulgarides, C., Fergus, E., & King Thorius, K. A. (2017). Pursuing Equity: Disproportionality in Special Education and the Reframing of Technical Solutions to Address Systemic Inequities. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 61–87.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X16686947>
- Waitoller, F., Artiles, A. J., & Cheney, D. (2010). The Miner's Canary: A Review of Overrepresentation Research and Explanations. *The Journal of Special Education*, 44(1), 29–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466908329226>

- Weaver-Hightower, M. B. (2008). An Ecology Metaphor for Educational Policy Analysis: A Call to Complexity. *Educational Researcher*, 37(3), 153–167.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X08318050>
- Webb, J. T., Amend, E. R., & Beljan, P. (2016). *Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults: Adhd, Bipolar, Ocd, Asperger's, Depression, and Other Disorders*. Gifted Unlimited.
- Wehmeyer, M. L., Lattin, D., & Agran, M. (2001). Achieving access to the general curriculum for students with mental retardation: A curriculum decision-making model. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 36(4), 327–342.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23879895>
- Welch, A. R. (1998). The Cult of Efficiency in Education: Comparative reflections on the reality and the rhetoric. *Comparative Education*, 34(2), 157–175.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03050069828252>
- Wien, C. A., & Dudley-Marling, C. (1998). Limited Vision: The Ontario Curriculum and Outcomes-Based Learning. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'éducation*, 23(4), 405–420. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1585755>
- Winton, S. (2013). Rhetorical analysis in critical policy research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26(2), 158–177.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2012.666288>
- Winton, S. (2019). Coordinating policy layers of school fundraising in Toronto, Ontario, Canada: An institutional ethnography. *Educational Policy*, 33(1), 44–66.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818807331>
- Winton, S., & Tuters, S. (2015). Constructing bullying in Ontario, Canada: A critical policy analysis. *Educational Studies*, 41(1–2), 122–142.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2014.955737>
- Withers, A. J. (2012). *Disability politics and theory*. Fernwood Pub.
- Withers, A. J. (2024). *Disability politics & theory* (Revised and expanded edition.). Fernwood Publishing.
- Wong, A. (2020). *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york/detail.action?docID=6073786>

- Yasnitsky, A. (2018). *Vygotsky: An intellectual biography*. Routledge.
- Yau, M., O'Reilly, J., Rosolen, L., Kozovski, K., & Archer, B. (2014). *2011-12 Student and Parent Census Technical Report: Methodology, Implementation, Data Processing, and Reporting* (13/14-06; p. 116). Toronto District School Board.
<https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/research/docs/reports/2011-12CensusTechRpt.pdf>
- Young, M. D., & Diem, S. (2018). Doing critical policy analysis in education research: An emerging paradigm. In C. R. Lochmiller (Ed.), *Complementary Research Methods for Educational Leadership and Policy Studies* (pp. 79–98). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93539-3_5
- Young, M. D., & Diem, S. (Eds.). (2023). *Handbook of Critical Education Research: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Emerging Approaches*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003141464>
- Young, M. D., Diem, S., & Sampson, C. (2024). The Vital Necessity of Critical Education Policy Research. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 46(2), 397–405.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737241239985>
- Zhang, J.-W., Wong, L., Chan, T.-H., & Chiu, C.-S. (2014). Curriculum adaptation in special schools for students with intellectual disabilities (SID): A case study of project learning in one SID school in Hong Kong. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 9(2), 250–273. (1651866972; EJ1032720). <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03397016>

Appendix A: Interview and Focus Group Questions

Teacher Interview Questions

Building Rapport:

- Tell me a bit about yourself
- Tell me about the student
- Grade level, Age
- What is currently in the IEP?
- What are the specific challenges?
- What level should he be modified to?

Student Performance Focused Questions:

- 1) Why should the student have curriculum modifications?
 - a. How do you know that the student is performing below grade level?
 - b. What assessments have you used?
 - c. What have you observed?
 - d. How do you know what grade level is?
 - e. What resources do you use to determine grade level?
 - f. What level do you think she should be modified to? Language? Math?
 - g. How do you know that would be a good level?
 - h. What does the grade __ expect of their reading/writing/math level?
- 2) Why do you think the student is performing at this level?
 - a. What have you observed?
 - b. What is your role (or the role of a teacher) in a case like this?
 - c. How does the student family feel about their child's performance?

Policy Focused Questions:

- 3) How do you go about starting the modification process?
 - a. What resources are available to guide this process? (e.g., staff, policy texts, etc.)
 - b. Who supports you with making this decision?
 - c. How is the family/student involved in this decision?
- 4) What will happen if the student receives modifications?
 - a. How will curriculum modification help the student?
 - b. Will there be any other impacts? (short term/long term)
 - c. What will happen to the student without modifications?
 - d. Are there any alternatives? How is AT working?
 - e. How do you evaluate with modifications vs standard?
 - f. Is a grade X level 3 equivalent to Grade X level...?

Topics to listen for and elaborate on in follow up questions:

- Where did you read that? How did you learn that?
- Do they know what a modification is?
- Use of accommodations, differentiation, Universal design – what specific strategies?
- Opinions about new shift in board policy re IEPs

Appendix A: Interview and Focus Group Questions

SSELs, Inclusion Consultants, or Administrator Focus Group Questions:

- 1) Tell us a bit about your school community and you staff culture.
- 2) Tell us a little bit about the curriculum modification process in your school. How/who makes that decision?
 - a. What are the main reasons students are modified in your school?
 - b. How common are Modified IEPs in your school?
 - c. What resources are available to guide this process? (e.g., staff, policy texts, etc.)
 - d. Who supports you with making this decision?
 - e. How is the family/student involved in this decision?
- 3) When a teacher is requesting curriculum modifications for a particular student, what factors do you consider?
 - a. What assessments do you consider?
 - b. How do you know that a student is performing below grade level?
 - c. How do teachers in your school judge what grade-level is?
 - d. How do you map on levels of achievement to the different grade levels?
 - e. How do you determine what level a student should be modified to?
 - f. How do they move up levels once on a modified curriculum? Who initiates that?
- 4) When a student is performing below grade level, what might explain their performance?
 - a. How might relationship with the teacher affect the decision?
 - b. How might teacher ability/performance affect the decision?
 - c. What is the role of accommodations in the process?
 - d. What emotions might be at play when teachers are working with these students?
- 5) What does the resource program look like in your school?
 - a. What subjects are taught?
 - b. Who does gap closing programs in math?
- 6) What are the impacts of curriculum modifications?
 - a. How will curriculum modification help the student?
 - b. Will there be any other impacts? (short term/long term)
 - c. What will happen to the student without modifications?
 - d. Are there any alternatives?

Topics to listen for and elaborate on in follow up questions:

- Where did you read that? How did you learn that?
- Do they know what a modification is?
- Use of accommodations, differentiation, Universal design – what specific strategies?
- Opinions about new shift in board policy re IEPs

Appendix B: Descriptions of Variables used in the Quantitative Analyses

IEP Type: This variable was built by combining information that came from the Board's administrative system Student Information Systems (SIS). The presence of an IEP was combined with other flags to determine the type of IEP. IEPs were coded as "gifted IEPs" if the student was also identified with the gifted exceptionality. IEPs were coded as "alternative IEPs" if the student was also identified with the developmental disability exceptionality. IEPs were coded as "Modified IEPs" if there was a "page 3" (see Chapter 1) generated in that specific subject area. The presence of an IEP without a "page 3" was considered an Accommodation-only IEP.

Race: Information on self-identified race was collected on the Grade 7/8 student census taken in the spring of this cohort's eighth grade year in 2017. Missing answers for some students were found on the parental census completed in third grade (2012), making this variable a composite of both sources.

Gender: Information on gender was also collected on the Grade 7/8 student census taken in the spring of 2017. Options included "Male," "Female" and "Other Gender." Missing answers were replaced with administrative information collected at the time of registration in the Board.

Neighbourhood Income: This is an ordinal categorical variable based on decile of median neighbourhood income. Ten groups were created from the lowest decile (or 10% of students with the lowest neighbourhood income) to the highest decile (10% of students with the highest neighbourhood income). This was done by matching the six-digit postal code of student residence with the median income of the dissemination area (the ECYHNIMED variable from Environics Analytics)

Absenteeism: Missing 10% or more of the school year is considered to be chronic absenteeism and is factor related to academic achievement (R. S. Brown et al., 2020). A binary variable was therefore created for students missing 10% or more of the school year. This information was drawn from SIS.

Suspension History: There is a strong evidence to suggest that suspension history has a significant impact on students' engagement and achievement (R. S. Brown et al., 2020). A binary variable was therefore created for students with a history of suspension. This information was drawn from SIS.

Learning Skills: On the first page of the Ontario report card, teachers evaluate students' achievement on six learning skills, including responsibility, organization, independent work, collaboration, initiative, and self-regulation. Learning skills can be assigned E's (excellent), G's (good), S's (satisfactory), or N's (needs improvement). This variable was made into a binary variable with everything "satisfactory" and above grouped together, and "Needs Improvement" in the other category. This information was extracted from the June report card for every grade.

Report Card Grade: Report cards are issued in February and June for elementary students. The report card grade variables are subject specific and based on the June report cards of each grade.

EQAO Achievement: Ontario students take part in province-wide standardized testing in reading, writing and mathematics administered by the provincial Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) in grades 3, 6, 9, and 10. The EQAO claims that these tests are designed to “accurately reflect the provincial curriculum expectations” (EQAO, n.d.). Students in the 2008-2009 cohort completed their Grade 3 EQAO tests in May or June of 2013. Results are provided from EQAO in the form of “dot scores” on an interval scale from 0 to 5 increasing in increments of 0.2. For most analyses, these scores were categorized as “no score” (students who did not complete enough questions to register a score), below level 1 (0-0.9), level 1 (1.1-1.9), level 2 (2.1-2.9), level 3 (3.1-3.9), and level 4 (4.1-4.9). This information was extracted from the Board’s SIS.

EQAO-Grade Alignment: This variable was created based on a matrix of 5 categories of EQAO scores (Below Level 1, Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, and Level 4) and 5 categories of report card grades (R, D, C, B, and A). When the EQAO score matched the equivalent report card grade (e.g., Level 2 = C), I coded the students as “aligned.” If the EQAO scores were lower than report card grades, I coded the students as “1 level higher at school” or “2 levels higher at school” depending on the degree of difference. When EQAO scores were higher than report card grades, I coded the students as either “1 level lower at school” or “2 levels lower at school.” Students who had a discrepancy of three or more levels were excluded from analysis because such large gaps were very rare and may have reflected unusual circumstances rather than systemic patterns. Ultimately, I used three categories in the variable: Aligned, inflated at school, and deflated at school.

Appendix C: Scoping Review Search Terms

Table C.1

Search Terms, Filters, and Results of Scoping Literature Review

	Search String	Search Filters	Results
ERIC	Curriculum (abstract) AND modification OR adaptation (abstract)	• Peer Review • Have access • Journal Articles Exclude: Higher education, postsecondary education, early childhood education, preschool education, adult education, two-year colleges, adult basic education Include: elementary education, secondary education, elementary secondary education, middle schools, high schools, junior high schools, Grade 12,11,10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1, kindergarten, primary education, intermediate grades,	287
	(noft("curriculum modification") OR noft("curricular modification") OR noft(modification)) AND noft(Canada) NOT noft("behavio* modification")	• Peer Review • Have access • Journal Articles	96
	abstract(Curriculum) AND abstract(modification) AND abstract(disability OR "special education")	• Peer Review • Have access • Journal Articles	74
	noft(curriculum) AND noft(adaptation) AND noft("special education" OR disability)	• Peer Review • Have access • Journal Articles	125
Jstor	Curriculum (abstract) AND modification OR adaptation (abstract)	• Articles • Content I can access • Return results for "Education" • English	69
SAGE	Curriculum (abstract) AND modification OR adaptation (abstract)	• Content I have full access to • Research article • Education	21
Scholar's portal	Curriculum (abstract) AND modification OR adaptation (abstract) AND "special education" OR "inclusive education" (anywhere)	• Content I can access • Peer Reviewed • Limited by subject = social sciences	25

Appendix D: Scoping Review Tables of Results

Authors, Year, Country	Terminology	Focus of Research	Exceptionality Group	Position
Avisar (2012), Israel	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Observation of practices in inclusive vs non-inclusive settings	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Awori, Mugo, Orodho, & Karugu (2010), Kenya	Combines or conflates - "Adaptation"	Self-esteem and academic achievement of Deaf girls	Other Specific Exceptionality- Deaf & Hard of Hearing	Promotes
Brown, Welsh, Hill, & Cipko (2008), USA	No definitions – Appears to conflate	Evaluation of special ed instruction in teacher preparation	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Butler & Nasser (2020), USA	No definitions – Appears to conflate	Analysis of state standardized achievement testing	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Butt & Lowe (2012), Australia	No definitions – Not able to infer meaning	Investigating role of TAs	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Neutral
Cho & Kingston (2013), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	AA-MAS - Qualitative case study design - test type decision making	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Critical / Cautionary

Appendix D: Scoping Review Tables of Results

Appendix D: Scoping Review Tables of Results

Authors, Year, Country	Terminology	Focus of Research	Exceptionality Group	Position
Cho & Kingston (2014), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	AA-MAS - Teacher interviews about test type decisions	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Critical / Cautionary
Cho & Kingston (2015), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	AA-MAS - Teacher Survey	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Critical / Cautionary
Dee (2010), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Content analysis of pre-service teacher lesson plans	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes with caution
Driver, Omichinski, Miller, Sandella, & Warschawsky (2010), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Discussion paper	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Dymond, Renzaglia, & Chun (2008), USA	No definitions – Appears to conflate	Barriers to inclusion in work study program	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Egilson & Traustadottir (2009), Iceland	Combines or conflates - "Adaptation"	School participation of students with physical disabilities	Other Specific Exceptionality– Physical Disabilities	Promotes

Appendix D : Scoping Review Tables of Results

Authors, Year, Country	Terminology	Focus of Research	Exceptionality Group	Position
Eichhorn (2016), India	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Impact of testing modifications in math	Other Specific Exceptionality- Math Learning Disabilities	Critical / Cautionary
Finnerty, Jackson, & Ostergren (2019), USA	Combines or conflates - "Adaptation"	Adaptations in general education classrooms	Significant Support Needs / Intellectual Disability	Promotes
Fitri (2022), Indonesia	No definitions – Not able to infer meaning	Exploration of inclusive education	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Fragkoulis & Dimakis (2019), Greece	No definitions – Not able to infer meaning	Views of teachers about mentorship being part of the education act	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Neutral
Janney & Snell (2006), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Discussion paper	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Koehler & Wild (2019), Canada/USA	No definitions – Appears to conflate	Access to science curriculum for students with visual impairments	Other Specific Exceptionality- Visual Disabilities	Promotes

Appendix D: Scoping Review Tables of Results

Authors, Year, Country	Terminology	Focus of Research	Exceptionality Group	Position
Koehler, Wild, & Tikkan (2018), USA	No definitions – Appears to conflate	Implications of 3-D printing for teaching geoscience concepts to students with visual impairments	Other Specific Exceptionality-Visual Disabilities	Promotes
Kurth & Keegan (2014), USA	Concepts defined separately-Acc & Mod	Use of adaptations for supporting students with IEPs	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Kurth, Ruppert, McQuestion, McCabe, Johnston, & Toews (2019), USA	Concepts defined separately-Acc & Mod	Content analysis of IEPs	Significant Support Needs / Intellectual Disability	Promotes
Lazarus, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Edwards (2015), USA	Concepts defined separately-Acc & Mod	AA-MAS - Analysis of how participation in AA-MAS was determined, in comparison to performance	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Critical / Cautionary
Lazarus & Rieke (2013), USA	Concepts defined separately-Acc & Mod	Discussion paper	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Critical / Cautionary

Appendix D: Scoping Review Tables of Results

Authors, Year, Country	Terminology	Focus of Research	Exceptionality Group	Position
Lee & Shin (2020), Korea	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Discussion paper	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Lee, Ammons, Gragoudas, Lee, Shogren, Theoharis, & Wehmyer (2006), USA	Combines or conflates	Discussion paper	Significant Support Needs / Intellectual Disability	Promotes
Lee, Wehmyer, Palmer, Soukup, & Little (2008), USA	Combines or conflates	Study about curriculum augmentations and adaptations	Significant Support Needs / Intellectual Disability	Promotes
Lee, Wehmyer, Soukup, & Palmer (2010), USA	Combines or conflates	Impact of modifications on accessing the curriculum	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Lin & Lin (2015), Canada	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Pre-post testing of inclusive education training for pre-service teachers	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Lourenco, Goncalves, & Elias (2015), Brazil	Combines or conflates - "Adaptation"	Use of differentiated instruction and assistive technology in Brazil	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes

Appendix D: Scoping Review Tables of Results

Authors, Year, Country	Terminology	Focus of Research	Exceptionality Group	Position
Lozano, Brandenberg, Ganz, & Wüthrich (2022), Switzerland	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Labelling effects of IEPs	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Critical / Cautionary
Marsh (2015), USA	No definitions – Appears to conflate	Discussion Paper	Other Specific Exceptionality- Autism	
Mashburn & Myers (2010), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Supports & services for students with speech- language impairments	Other Specific Exceptionality- Speech Language Impairments	Neutral
McLeod & McKinnon (2010), Australia	Concepts defined separately- Different terms	Teacher perception of required and actual level of support	Significant Support Needs / Intellectual Disability	Neutral
Moore-Abdool (2010), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Literature review on modifications	Other Specific Exceptionality- Autism	Promotes
Morningstar, Shogren, Lee, & Born (2015), USA	No definitions – Appears to conflate	Supporting participation and learning in inclusive classrooms	Significant Support Needs / Intellectual Disability	Promotes

Appendix D: Scoping Review Tables of Results

Authors, Year, Country	Terminology	Focus of Research	Exceptionality Group	Position
Musson, Thomas, Towles-Reeves, & Kearns (2010), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	AA-MAS - Content Analysis of 50 state guidelines to determine participation in AA-AAS	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Critical / Cautionary
Negash & Gasa (2022), Ethiopia	Combines or conflates - "Adaptation"	Barriers that prevent the inclusion of learners with visual impairment in mainstream schools	Other Specific Exceptionality- Visual Disabilities	Promotes
Nevin, Cramer, Voigt, & Salazar (2008), USA	No definitions – Appears to conflate	Describing the impact of "looping" (teachers staying with the same class for two years)	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Neutral
Nolet (2006), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Discussion paper	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes with caution
Norwich & Lewis (2007), USA	Combines or conflates - "Adaptation"	Discussion paper	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Otukile-Mongwaketse, Mangope, & Kuyini (2016), Botswana	Combines or conflates - "Adaptation"	Teacher understanding of adaptations	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes

Appendix D: Scoping Review Tables of Results

Authors, Year, Country	Terminology	Focus of Research	Exceptionality Group	Position
Paccaud & Luder (2017), Switzerland	Concepts defined separately- different terms	IEP goal quality. Focus on modified vs alternative goals	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Critical / Cautionary
Raven & Whitman (2019), USA	No definitions – Appears to conflate	How educators of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing student teach science	Other Specific Exceptionality- Deaf & Hard of Hearing	Promotes
Riga, Andreou, & Anastassiou (2017), Greece	Combines or conflates - "Adaptation"	Literature review of teaching strategies for students with SLD	Other Specific Exceptionality- Specific Learning Disabilities	Promotes
Shafiel & Rutt (2011), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	AA-MAS - Quantitative analysis of AA-MAS performance	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Critical / Cautionary
Soukup, Wehneyer, & Bashinski (2007), USA	Combines or conflates	Access to curriculum for students with intellectual disability	Significant Support Needs / Intellectual Disability	Promotes
Staples (2013), USA	No definitions – Not able to infer meaning	Evaluation of para-educator professional development program	Other Specific Exceptionality- Specific Learning Disabilities	Neutral

Appendix D: Scoping Review Tables of Results

Authors, Year, Country	Terminology	Focus of Research	Exceptionality Group	Position
Thurlow, Quenemoen, & Albus (2013), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Discussion paper	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Critical / Cautionary
Tiernan, Casserly, & Maguire (2020), Ireland	No definitions – Not able to infer meaning	Perceptions of teachers re how they meet the needs of pupils with SEN in multi- grade classrooms	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Titone (2005), USA	Combines or conflates - "Adaptation"	Knowledge teachers need for successful inclusion	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Trela & Jimenez (2013), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Discussion paper	Significant Support Needs / Intellectual Disability	Promotes with caution
Tremblay & Belley (2017), Canada	Concepts defined separately- Different terms	Content Analysis of IEP templates and policy documents	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Neutral
VanWeelden & Whipple (2014), USA	No definitions – Appears to conflate	Music teachers' perceptions of inclusion	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes

Appendix D: Scoping Review Tables of Results

Authors, Year, Country	Terminology	Focus of Research	Exceptionality Group	Position
Vaughan & Henderson (2016), USA	Concepts defined separately- Acc & Mod	Efficacy of training program for teaching students with Down Syndrome	Significant Support Needs / Intellectual Disability	Promotes
Watermeyer, Lourens, Botha, Khumalo, Kelly, & Shanda (2023), South Africa	Combines or conflates - "Adaptation"	Evaluation of panel chats during teacher education training	Other Specific Exceptionality- Visual Disabilities	Promotes
Wu-Tien (2007), Taiwan	Combines or conflates - "Adaptation"	Discussion paper	Pan-disability / Unspecified	Promotes
Yuen, Westwood, & Wong (2005), Hong Kong	Combines or conflates - "Adaptation"	What classroom teachers do to support students with specific learning difficulties	Other Specific Exceptionality- Specific Learning Disabilities	Promotes
Zhang, Wong, Chan, & Chiu (2014), Hong Kong	Concepts defined separately- Different terms	Case study of project-based learning	Significant Support Needs / Intellectual Disability	Promotes

Appendix E: Risk of New IEPs in the Junior Division by Race

Table E.1

Descriptive Statistics of New Accommodation-only and “Inappropriate” Modified IEPs in the Jr Division - Reading

	No IEP (N=8,278)	Accommodation (N=454)	Modified IEP (N=147)	Total (N=8,879)
Race (Identified by student or family)				
Black	772 (9.3%)	59 (13.0%)	27 (18.4%)	858 (9.7%)
East Asian	1,080 (13.0%)	30 (6.6%)	10 (6.8%)	1,120 (12.6%)
Latine	97 (1.2%)	6 (1.3%)	8 (5.4%)	111 (1.3%)
Middle Eastern	353 (4.3%)	26 (5.7%)	8 (5.4%)	387 (4.4%)
Multi-racial	872 (10.5%)	64 (14.1%)	16 (10.9%)	952 (10.7%)
South Asian	2,306 (27.9%)	66 (14.5%)	32 (21.8%)	2,404 (27.1%)
Southeast Asian	307 (3.7%)	5 (1.1%)	9 (6.1%)	321 (3.6%)
White	2,019 (24.4%)	172 (37.9%)	28 (19.0%)	2,219 (25.0%)
Race Info Not Available	472 (5.7%)	26 (5.7%)	9 (6.1%)	507 (5.7%)
*Decile of				
Neighbourhood Income	5.901 (2.842)	5.608 (2.999)	4.986 (2.843)	5.871 (2.853)
Gender				
Female	4,386 (53.0%)	217 (47.8%)	62 (42.2%)	4,665 (52.5%)
Male	3,892 (47.0%)	237 (52.2%)	85 (57.8%)	4,214 (47.5%)

Note. The columns for each variable total 100%. **Decile of Neighbourhood Income is a continuous variable. The values above are each group's means and corresponding standard errors in parenthesis.

Appendix E: Risk of New IEPs in the Junior Division by Race

Table E.2

Estimates the Relative Risk Ratio (RRR) and Predicted Probabilities (PP) of Starting a New Accommodation-only or “Inappropriate” Modified IEP in the Jr Division - Reading

	Accommodations			Modifications		
	RRR	(95% CI)	PP	RRR	(95% CI)	PP
Race						
Black	2.45**	(1.70-3.53)	6.2%**	2.26**	(1.33-3.82)	2.7%**
East Asian	1.03	(0.66-1.59)	2.7%**	0.72	(0.35-1.48)	0.9%**
Latine	2.07	(0.87-4.89)	5.1%*	5.55**	(2.49-12.4)	6.5%**
Middle Eastern	0.58*	(1.56-3.97)	6.3%**	1.56	(0.71-3.41)	1.9%**
Multi-racial	2.49**	(1.90-3.86)	6.9%**	1.43	(0.78-2.63)	1.7%**
South Asian (base)	1.0		2.7%**	1.0		1.3%**
Southeast Asian	0.56	(0.23-1.41)	1.5%*	2.09	(0.99-4.42)	2.7%**
White	3.37**	(2.50-4.53)	8.4%**	1.19	(0.70-2.00)	1.4%**
Race Not Available	1.96**	(1.23-3.12)	5.1%**	1.42	(0.67-2.99)	1.8%**
Neighbourhood Income	0.94**	(0.99-1.00)		0.99**	(0.99-1.00)	
Gender						
Female (base)	1.0			1.0		
Male	1.60**	(1.05-1.53)		1.53*	(1.10-2.13)	

Note. Estimates the relative risk ratio (RRR) and predicted probabilities (PP) of starting a new IEP in the Jr division. **p < .01, *p < .05, Total observations = 8,879

Pseudo R² = 0.0324, LR chi² (20) = 164.06, Prob > chi² = 0.000

Relative Risk Ratios (RRR) compare the likelihood of an event occurring relative to the base group. If the RRR > 1, the outcome is more likely to occur relative to the base group. If the RRR < 1, the outcome is less likely to occur relative to the base group. **Predicted Probabilities (PP)** show the probability of an outcome occurring relative to 0. PPs are an absolute measure. **Confidence Intervals (CI)** represent the range in which the true RRR is likely to be, based on data. If the study were repeated multiple times, the interval would contain the true RRR in 95% of the time.

Accommodations: In this context, the accommodation outcome refers to students who started a new Accommodation-only IEP and students who started a new modification IEP but did not have any modifications in Reading. Accommodations in the IEP tend to be very general (i.e., strategic seating, frequent breaks) and likely apply to the subjects in which the student does not have a curriculum modification.

Includes: Students in the Board from grades 3-6 who did not have IEPs in Gr 3.

Excludes: Students who scored Level 1 or below on Gr 3 EQAO in Reading (to isolate inappropriate initiations of modifications), French Immersion students (they do not do Gr 3 EQAO testing in Reading), and the exclusions listed in Chapter 2.

Appendix E: Risk of New IEPs in the Junior Division by Race

Table E.3

Descriptive Statistics of New Accommodation-only and “Inappropriate” Modified IEPs in the Jr Division - Writing

	No IEP (N=8,458)	Accommodation (N=465)	Modified IEP (N=229)	Total (N=9,152)
Race (Identified by student or family)				
Black	807 (9.5%)	66 (14.2%)	42 (18.3%)	915 (10.0%)
East Asian	1,104 (13.1%)	34 (7.3%)	12 (5.2%)	1,150 (12.6%)
Latine	99 (1.2%)	7 (1.5%)	10 (4.4%)	116 (1.3%)
Middle Eastern	370 (4.4%)	26 (5.6%)	12 (5.2%)	408 (4.5%)
Multi-racial	886 (10.5%)	63 (13.5%)	26 (11.4%)	975 (10.7%)
South Asian	2,348 (27.8%)	70 (15.1%)	42 (18.3%)	2,460 (26.9%)
Southeast Asian	310 (3.7%)	6 (1.3%)	10 (4.4%)	326 (3.6%)
White	2,039 (24.1%)	164 (35.3%)	53 (23.1%)	2,256 (24.7%)
Race Info Not Available	495 (5.9%)	29 (6.2%)	22 (9.6%)	546 (6.0%)
**Decile of				
Neighbourhood Income	5.878 (2.842)	5.499 (3.021)	4.852 (2.852)	5.833 (2.857)
Gender				
Female	4,468 (52.8%)	225 (48.4%)	93 (40.6%)	4,786 (52.3%)
Male	3,990 (47.2%)	240 (51.6%)	136 (59.4%)	4,366 (47.7%)

Note. The columns for each variable total 100%. **Decile of Neighbourhood Income is a continuous variable. The values above are each group's means and corresponding standard errors in parenthesis.

Appendix E: Risk of New IEPs in the Junior Division by Race

Table E.4

Estimates the Relative Risk Ratio (RRR) and Predicted Probabilities (PP) of Starting a New Accommodation-only or “Inappropriate” Modified IEP in the Jr Division - Writing

	Accommodations			Modifications		
	RRR	(95% CI)	PP	RRR	(95% CI)	PP
Race						
Black	2.50**	(1.76-3.55)	6.5%**	2.51**	(1.62-3.91)	3.8%**
East Asian	1.09	(0.72-1.66)	3.0%**	0.67	(0.35-1.28)	1.1%**
Latine	2.27*	(1.02-5.07)	5.7%**	5.19**	(2.52-10.7)	7.6%**
Middle Eastern	2.27**	(1.43-3.62)	6.0%**	1.70	(0.89-3.26)	2.6%**
Multi-racial	2.51**	(1.77-3.57)	6.6%**	1.80*	(1.10-2.96)	2.8%**
South Asian (base)	1.00		2.8%**	1.00		1.6%**
Southeast Asian	0.64	(0.28-1.49)	1.8%*	1.77	(0.88-3.57)	2.9%**
White	3.07**	(2.29-4.12)	7.9%**	1.81**	(1.19-2.75)	2.7%**
Race Not Available	2.00**	(1.28-3.12)	5.2%**	2.58**	(1.52-4.37)	4.0%**
Neighbourhood Income	0.99**	(0.99-1.00)		0.99**	(0.98-0.99)	
Gender						
Female (base)	1.00			1.00		
Male	1.23*	(1.02-1.48)		1.66**	(1.27-2.17)	

Note. **p < .01, *p < .05, Total observations = 9,152

Pseudo R² = 0.0324, LR chi² (20) = 187.50, Prob > chi² = 0.000

Relative Risk Ratios (RRR) compare the likelihood of an event occurring relative to the base group. If the RRR > 1, the outcome is more likely to occur relative to the base group. If the RRR < 1, the outcome is less likely to occur relative to the base group. **Predicted Probabilities (PP)** show the probability of an outcome occurring relative to 0. PPs are an absolute measure. **Confidence Intervals (CI)** represent the range in which the true RRR is likely to be, based on data. If the study were repeated multiple times, the interval would contain the true RRR in 95% of the time.

Accommodations: In this context, the accommodation outcome refers to students who started a new Accommodation-only IEP and students who started a new modification IEP but did not have any modifications in Writing. Accommodations in the IEP tend to be very general (i.e., strategic seating, frequent breaks) and likely apply to the subjects in which the student does not have a curriculum modification.

Includes: Students in the Board from grades 3-6 who did not have IEPs in Gr 3.

Excludes: Students who scored Level 1 or below on Gr 3 EQAO in Reading (to isolate inappropriate initiations of modifications), French Immersion students (they do not do Gr 3 EQAO testing in Reading), and the exclusions listed in Chapter 2.

Appendix E: Risk of New IEPs in the Junior Division by Race

Table E.5

Descriptive Statistics of New Accommodation-only and “Inappropriate” Modified IEPs in the Jr Division - Math

	No IEP (N=9,582)	Accommodation (N=522)	Modified IEP (N=221)	Total (N=10,325)
Race (Identified by student or family)				
Black	871 (9.1%)	65 (12.5%)	43 (19.5%)	979 (9.5%)
East Asian	1,216 (12.7%)	45 (8.6%)	9 (4.1%)	1,270 (12.3%)
Latine	114 (1.2%)	7 (1.3%)	9 (4.1%)	130 (1.3%)
Middle Eastern	408 (4.3%)	22 (4.2%)	13 (5.9%)	443 (4.3%)
Multi-racial	1,109 (11.6%)	75 (14.4%)	29 (13.1%)	1,213 (11.7%)
South Asian	2,409 (25.1%)	66 (12.6%)	40 (18.1%)	2,515 (24.4%)
Southeast Asian	320 (3.3%)	7 (1.3%)	10 (4.5%)	337 (3.3%)
White	2,593 (27.1%)	203 (38.9%)	50 (22.6%)	2,846 (27.6%)
Race Info Not Available	542 (5.7%)	32 (6.1%)	18 (8.1%)	592 (5.7%)
**Decile of				
Neighbourhood Income	6.014 (2.848)	5.738 (3.059)	4.882 (2.879)	5.975 (2.865)
Gender				
Female	5,139 (53.6%)	223 (42.7%)	110 (49.8%)	5,472 (53.0%)
Male	4,443 (46.4%)	299 (57.3%)	111 (50.2%)	4,853 (47.0%)

Note. The columns for each variable total 100%. **Decile of Neighbourhood Income is a continuous variable. The values above are each group's means and corresponding standard errors in parenthesis.

Appendix E: Risk of New IEPs in the Junior Division by Race

Table E.6

Estimates the Relative Risk Ratio (RRR) and Predicted Probabilities (PP) of Starting a New Accommodation-only or “Inappropriate” Modified IEP in the Jr Division - Math

	Accommodations			Modifications		
	RRR	(95% CI)	PP	RRR	(95% CI)	PP
Race						
Black	2.53**	(1.78-3.61)	6.0%**	2.54**	(1.63-3.96)	3.6%**
East Asian	1.44	(0.97-2.11)	3.6%**	0.49	(0.24-1.02)	0.7%**
Latine	2.11	(0.95-4.71)	4.9%**	4.51**	(2.13-9.55)	6.2%**
Middle Eastern	1.89*	(1.15-3.10)	4.6%**	1.82	(0.96-3.43)	2.6%**
Multi-racial	2.66**	(1.89-3.73)	6.3%**	1.71*	(1.05-2.78)	2.4%**
South Asian (base)	1.0		2.5%**	1.0		1.5%**
Southeast Asian	0.79	(0.36-1.74)	2.0%**	1.84	(0.91-3.72)	2.8%**
White	3.29**	(2.46-4.39)	7.7%**	1.45	(0.94-2.23)	2.0%**
Race Not Available	2.25**	(1.46-3.46)	5.4%**	2.06*	(1.17-3.62)	2.9%**
Neighbourhood Income	0.99**	(0.99-1.00)		0.99**	(0.98-0.99)	
Gender						
Female (base)	1.0			1.0		
Male	1.60**	(1.34-1.92)		1.67	(0.89-1.53)	

Note. **p < .01, *p < .05, Total observations = 10,325

Pseudo R² = 0.319, LR chi² (20) = 199.1, Prob > chi² = 0.000

Relative Risk Ratios (RRR) compare the likelihood of an event occurring relative to the base group. If the RRR > 1, the outcome is more likely to occur relative to the base group. If the RRR < 1, the outcome is less likely to occur relative to the base group. **Predicted Probabilities (PP)** show the probability of an outcome occurring relative to 0. PPs are an absolute measure. **Confidence Intervals (CI)** represent the range in which the true RRR is likely to be, based on data. If the study were repeated multiple times, the interval would contain the true RRR in 95% of the time.

Accommodations: In this context, the accommodation outcome refers to students who started a new Accommodation-only IEP and students who started a new modification IEP but did not have any modifications in Math. Accommodations in the IEP tend to be very general (i.e., strategic seating, frequent breaks) and likely apply to the subjects in which the student does not have a curriculum modification.

Includes: Students in the Board from grades 3-6 who did not have IEPs in Gr 3. Unlike the Reading and Writing models, French Immersion students are included because they complete the Gr 3 EQAO testing in Math.

Excludes: Students who scored Level 1 or below on Gr 3 EQAO in Reading (to isolate inappropriate initiations of modifications), French Immersion students (they do not do Gr 3 EQAO testing in Reading), and the exclusions listed in Chapter 2.

Appendix E: Risk of New IEPs in the Junior Division by Race

Table E.7

Descriptive Statistics of New Accommodation-only IEPs in the Jr Division

	No IEP (N=8,216)	Acc-only IEP (N=330)	Modified IEP (N=237)	Total (N=8,783)
Race (Identified by student or family)				
Black	757 (9.2%)	43 (13.0%)	36 (15.2%)	836 (9.5%)
East Asian	1,077 (13.1%)	29 (8.8%)	9 (3.8%)	1,115 (12.7%)
Latine	97 (1.2%)	3 (0.9%)	10 (4.2%)	110 (1.3%)
Middle Eastern	348 (4.2%)	18 (5.5%)	14 (5.9%)	380 (4.3%)
Multi-racial	865 (10.5%)	47 (14.2%)	29 (12.2%)	941 (10.7%)
South Asian	2,298 (28.0%)	48 (14.5%)	46 (19.4%)	2,392 (27.2%)
Southeast Asian	300 (3.7%)	3 (0.9%)	10 (4.2%)	313 (3.6%)
White	2,012 (24.5%)	124 (37.6%)	67 (28.3%)	2,203 (25.1%)
Race Info Not Available	462 (5.6%)	15 (4.5%)	16 (6.8%)	493 (5.6%)
**Decile of Neighbourhood Income				
	59.108 (28.422)	56.545 (30.471)	52.911 (28.752)	58.844 (28.529)
Gender				
Female	4,350 (52.9%)	155 (47.0%)	105 (44.3%)	4,610 (52.5%)
Male	3,866 (47.1%)	175 (53.0%)	132 (55.7%)	4,173 (47.5%)

Note. The columns for each variable total 100%. **Decile of Neighbourhood Income is a continuous variable. The values above are each group's means and corresponding standard errors in parenthesis.

Appendix E: Risk of New IEPs in the Junior Division by Race

Table E.8

Estimates the Relative Risk Ratio (RRR) and Predicted Probabilities (PP) of Starting a New Accommodation-only IEP in the Jr Division

	Accommodation-Only IEP			Modifications in any Subject		
	RRR	(95% CI)	PP	RRR	(95% CI)	PP
Race						
Black	2.51**	(1.64-3.84)	4.6%**	2.16**	(1.38-3.38)	3.8%**
East Asian	1.36	(0.85-2.17)	2.7%**	0.45*	(0.22-0.92)	0.8%**
Latine	1.41	(0.43-4.62)	2.5%	4.9**	(2.38-9.94)	8.3%**
Middle Eastern	2.39*	(1.37-4.16)	4.4%**	1.92*	(1.04-3.53)	3.4%**
Multi-racial	2.75**	(1.82-4.15)	5.1%**	1.79*	(1.12-2.88)	3.2%**
South Asian (base)	1.0		1.9%**	1.0		1.9%**
Southeast Asian	0.47	(0.15-1.53)	0.9%	1.64	(0.82-3.29)	3.0%**
White	3.32**	(2.35-4.70)	6.1%**	1.92**	(1.30-2.84)	3.3%**
Race Not Available	1.60	(0.89-2.88)	3.0%**	1.79*	(1.00-3.29)	3.2%**
Neighbourhood Income	0.99**	(0.99-1.00)		0.99**	(0.99-1.00)	
Gender						
Female (base)	1.0			1.0		
Male	1.31*	(1.05-1.63)		1.42**	(1.09-1.84)	

Note. **p < .01, *p < .05, Total observations = 8,783

Pseudo R² = 0.0291, LR chi² (20) = 144.82, Prob > chi² = 0.000

Relative Risk Ratios (RRR) compare the likelihood of an event occurring relative to the base group. If the RRR > 1, the outcome is more likely to occur relative to the base group. If the RRR < 1, the outcome is less likely to occur relative to the base group. **Predicted Probabilities (PP)** show the probability of an outcome occurring relative to 0. PPs are an absolute measure. **Confidence Intervals (CI)** represent the range in which the true RRR is likely to be, based on data. If the study were repeated multiple times, the interval would contain the true RRR in 95% of the time.

Accommodation-only IEP: In this context, the accommodation outcome refers to students who started a new Accommodation-only IEP. The modification outcome refers to students with a Modified IEP in any subject. This is slightly different than the subject specific models. It is not possible to determine if the Accommodation-only IEPs are “appropriate” or not. This data therefore represents the initiation rates of Accommodation-only IEPs relative to inappropriate Modification IEPs for students performing at Level 2 or above in all three subjects.

Includes: Students in the Board from Gr 3-6 who did not have IEPs in Gr 3.

Excludes: Students who scored Level 1 or below on Gr 3 EQAO in Reading (to isolate inappropriate initiations of modifications), French Immersion students (they do not do Gr 3 EQAO testing in Reading), and the exclusions listed in Chapter 2.

Appendix F: Model Comparison

Table F.1

Descriptives of Mediating Variable Comparison - Reading

	No IEP (N=8,278)	Accommodation (N=454)	Modified IEP (N=147)	Total (N=8,879)
Race				
Black	772 (9.3%)	59 (13.0%)	27 (18.4%)	858 (9.7%)
East Asian	1,080 (13.0%)	30 (6.6%)	10 (6.8%)	1,120 (12.6%)
Latine	97 (1.2%)	6 (1.3%)	8 (5.4%)	111 (1.3%)
Middle Eastern	353 (4.3%)	26 (5.7%)	8 (5.4%)	387 (4.4%)
Multi-racial	872 (10.5%)	64 (14.1%)	16 (10.9%)	952 (10.7%)
South Asian	2,306 (27.9%)	66 (14.5%)	32 (21.8%)	2,404 (27.1%)
Southeast Asian	307 (3.7%)	5 (1.1%)	9 (6.1%)	321 (3.6%)
White	2,019 (24.4%)	172 (37.9%)	28 (19.0%)	2,219 (25.0%)
Race Info Not Available	472 (5.7%)	26 (5.7%)	9 (6.1%)	507 (5.7%)
Neighbourhood Income	5.901 (2.842)	5.608 (2.999)	4.986 (2.843)	5.871 (2.853)
Gender				
Female	4,386 (53.0%)	217 (47.8%)	62 (42.2%)	4,665 (52.5%)
Male	3,892 (47.0%)	237 (52.2%)	85 (57.8%)	4,214 (47.5%)
*Absenteeism in Gr3				
Absent <10%	7,327 (88.5%)	378 (83.3%)	112 (76.2%)	7,817 (88.0%)
Absent ≥10%	951 (11.5%)	76 (16.7%)	35 (23.8%)	1,062 (12.0%)
*Gr3 Suspensions				
None (base)	8,260 (99.8%)	452 (99.6%)	145 (98.6%)	88.86 (99.8%)
One or More	18 (0.2%)	2 (0.4%)	2 (1.4%)	22 (0.2%)
*Learning Skills in Gr3				
S, G, or E	8,228 (99.4%)	434 (95.6%)	132 (89.8%)	8,794 (99.0%)
Needs Improvement	50 (0.6%)	20 (4.4%)	15 (10.2%)	85 (1.0%)
*Gr3 Report Card Grade	76.62 (7.55)	70.04 (7.51)	64.04 (7.35)	76.07 (7.84)
*EQAO vs School Report Card Grades				
Scores Align	4,737 (57.2%)	241 (53.1%)	77 (52.4%)	5,055 (56.9%)
Grades Deflated	1,325 (16.0%)	115 (25.3%)	53 (36.1%)	1,493 (16.8%)
Grades Inflated	2,216 (26.8%)	98 (21.6%)	17 (11.6%)	2,331 (26.3%)

Note. The columns for each variable total 100%. Neighbourhood Income and Report Card Grades are continuous variables. The values above are each group's means and corresponding standard errors in parenthesis. *Indicates that the variable mediates (facilitates) the relationship between race/racism and the outcome.

Appendix F: Model Comparison

Table F.2

Mediating Variable Comparison Table - Reading

Modifications in Reading	Base Model	Mediated Model 1	Mediated Model 2	Mediated Model 3	Mediated Model 4
Race					
Black	2.26**	2.31**	2.21**	2.31**	2.30**
East Asian	0.72	0.78	0.72	1.00	0.74
Latine	5.55**	4.91**	5.47**	6.27**	5.56**
Middle Eastern	1.56	1.59	1.54	1.56	1.60
Multi-Racial	1.43	1.42	1.41	2.46**	1.53
South Asian (base)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Southeast Asian	2.09	2.19*	2.09	3.12**	2.18*
White	1.19	1.18	1.18	2.70**	1.32
Race Not Available	1.42	1.31	1.41	1.38	1.45
Neighbourhood Income	0.99**	0.99*	0.99**	1.00	0.99**
Gender					
Female (base)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Male	1.53*	1.53*	1.51*	1.23	1.52*
Gr3 Absences					
Absent <10% (base)		1.00			
Absent ≥10%		2.13**			
Gr3 Suspensions					
None (base)			1.00		
One or More			3.58		
Gr3 Learning Skills					
E/G/S (base)				1.00	
Needs Improvement				3.13**	
Gr3 Report Card Grade in Reading				0.81**	
EQAO vs School Report Card Grades					
Grades Align w EQAO (base)					1.00
Grades Deflated					2.38**
Grades Inflated					0.47**

Continued next page...

Appendix F: Model Comparison

Table F.2 - Continued

Accommodations in Reading	Base Model	Mediated Model 1	Mediated Model 2	Mediated Model 3	Mediated Model 4
Race					
Black	2.45**	2.48**	2.45**	2.31**	2.48**
East Asian	1.03	1.06	1.03	1.23	1.04
Latine	2.07	1.96	2.06	1.96	2.06
Middle Eastern	2.49**	2.51**	2.48**	2.42**	2.51**
Multi-Racial	2.71**	2.70**	2.70**	3.47**	2.80**
South Asian (base)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Southeast Asian	0.56	0.58	0.56	0.66	0.58
White	1.19	1.18	1.18	2.70**	1.32
Race Not Available	1.96**	1.90**	1.96**	1.95**	1.99**
Neighbourhood Income	0.99**	0.99*	0.99**	1.00	0.99**
Gender					
Female (base)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Male	1.27*	1.27*	1.26*	1.06	1.25*
Gr3 Absences					
Absent <10% (base)		1.00			
Absent ≥10%		1.43**			
Gr3 Suspensions					
None (base)			1.00		
One or More			1.37		
Gr3 Learning Skills					
E/G/S (base)				1.00	
Needs Improvement				2.41**	
Gr3 Report Card Grade in Reading				0.88**	
EQAO vs School Report Card Grades					
Grades Align w EQAO (base)					1.00
Grades Deflated					1.81**
Grades Inflated					0.84
Pseudo R-squared	0.0324	0.0360	0.0328	0.1674	0.0461
χ^2	164.06	182.50	166.21	847.85	233.58

Note. **p < .01, *p < .05. Observations = 8,879. All model p-values = 0.000.

Comparison of five multinomial logistic regressions models. The base model is the same as Table E.2. The mediated models each show the effects of a different mediating variable(s) (Model 1= chronic absenteeism, Model 2= suspension history, Model 3= learning skills and report card grades, and Model 4= EQAO/grade alignment).

Appendix F: Model Comparison

Table F.3

Descriptives of Mediating Variable Comparison - Writing

	No IEP (N=8,458)	Accommodation (N=465)	Modified IEP (N=229)	Total (N=9,152)
Race (Identified by student or family)				
Black	807 (9.5%)	66 (14.2%)	42 (18.3%)	915 (10.0%)
East Asian	1,104 (13.1%)	34 (7.3%)	12 (5.2%)	1,150 (12.6%)
Latine	99 (1.2%)	7 (1.5%)	10 (4.4%)	116 (1.3%)
Middle Eastern	370 (4.4%)	26 (5.6%)	12 (5.2%)	408 (4.5%)
Multi-racial	886 (10.5%)	63 (13.5%)	26 (11.4%)	975 (10.7%)
South Asian	2,348 (27.8%)	70 (15.1%)	42 (18.3%)	2,460 (26.9%)
Southeast Asian	310 (3.7%)	6 (1.3%)	10 (4.4%)	326 (3.6%)
White	2,039 (24.1%)	164 (35.3%)	53 (23.1%)	2,256 (24.7%)
Race Info Not Available	495 (5.9%)	29 (6.2%)	22 (9.6%)	546 (6.0%)
Neighbourhood Income	5.878 (2.842)	5.499 (3.021)	4.852 (2.852)	5.833 (2.857)
Gender				
Female	4,468 (52.8%)	225 (48.4%)	93 (40.6%)	4,786 (52.3%)
Male	3,990 (47.2%)	240 (51.6%)	136 (59.4%)	4,366 (47.7%)
*Absenteeism in Gr3				
Absent <10%	7,474 (88.4%)	394 (84.7%)	164 (71.6%)	8,032 (87.8%)
Absent ≥10%	984 (11.6%)	71 (15.3%)	65 (28.4%)	1,120 (12.2%)
*Gr3 Suspensions				
None (base)	8,439 (99.8%)	462 (99.4%)	227 (99.1%)	9,128 (99.7%)
One or More	19 (0.2%)	3 (0.6%)	2 (0.9%)	24 (0.3%)
*Learning Skills in Gr3				
S, G, or E	8,403 (99.3%)	446 (95.9%)	209 (91.3%)	9,058 (99.0%)
Needs Improvement	55 (0.7%)	19 (4.1%)	20 (8.7%)	94 (1.0%)
*Gr3 Report Card Grade - Writing	74.43 (7.45)	67.03 (7.172)	61.76 (6.832)	73.739 (7.833)
*EQAO vs School Report Card Grades				
Scores Align	4,879 (57.7%)	210 (45.2%)	80 (34.9%)	5,169 (56.5%)
Grades Deflated	2,042 (24.1%)	213 (45.8%)	136 (59.4%)	2,391 (26.1%)
Grades Inflated	1,537 (18.2%)	42 (9.0%)	13 (5.7%)	1,592 (17.4%)

Note. The columns for each variable total 100%. Neighbourhood Income and Report Card Grades are continuous variables. The values above are each group's means and corresponding standard errors in parenthesis. *Indicates that the variable mediates (facilitates) the relationship between race/racism and the outcome.

Appendix F: Model Comparison

Table F.4

Mediation Comparison Table - Writing

Modifications in Writing	Base Model	Mediated Model 1	Mediated Model 2	Mediated Model 3	Mediated Model 4
Race					
Black	2.51**	2.61**	2.49**	2.17**	2.45**
East Asian	0.67	0.75	0.67	0.91	0.72
Latine	5.19**	4.43**	5.16**	5.16**	5.49**
Middle Eastern	1.70	1.74	1.69	1.72	1.79
Multi-Racial	1.80*	1.76*	1.78*	2.67**	2.03**
South Asian (base)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Southeast Asian	1.77	1.89	1.77	3.57*	2.05*
White	1.81**	1.77**	1.81**	3.31**	2.23**
Race Not Available	2.58**	2.32**	2.58**	2.62**	2.29**
Neighbourhood Income	0.99**	0.99**	0.99**	1.00	0.99**
Gender					
Female (base)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Male	1.66**	1.67**	1.65**	1.46**	1.02
Gr3 Absences					
Absent <10% (base)		1.00			
Absent ≥10%		2.58**			
Gr3 Suspensions					
None (base)			1.00		
One or More			2.13		
Gr3 Learning Skills					
E/G/S (base)				1.00	
Needs Improvement				1.54	
Gr3 Report Card Grade in Reading				0.79**	
EQAO vs School Report Card Grades					
Grades Align w EQAO (base)					1.00
Grades Deflated					3.85**
Grades Inflated					0.53*

Continued on next page...

Appendix F: Model Comparison

Table F.4 - Continued

Accommodations in Writing	Base Model	Mediated Model 1	Mediated Model 2	Mediated Model 3	Mediated Model 4
Race					
Black	2.50**	2.52**	2.48**	2.11**	2.47**
East Asian	1.09	1.11	1.09	1.34	1.15
Latine	2.27*	2.20	2.26*	1.98	2.34*
Middle Eastern	2.27**	2.28**	2.26**	2.13**	2.35**
Multi-Racial	2.51**	2.50**	2.49**	3.02**	2.76**
South Asian (base)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Southeast Asian	0.64	0.65	0.64	0.87	0.71
White	3.07**	3.06**	3.07**	4.27**	3.57**
Race Not Available	2.00**	1.96**	2.00**	1.82**	2.04**
Neighbourhood Income	0.99**	0.99**	0.99**	1.00	0.99**
Gender					
Female (base)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Male	1.23*	1.23*	1.22*	0.86	1.11
Gr3 Absences					
Absent <10% (base)		1.00			
Absent ≥10%		1.25			
Gr3 Suspensions					
None (base)			1.00		
One or More			1.96		
Gr3 Learning Skills					
E/G/S (base)				1.00	
Needs Improvement				1.53	
Gr3 Report Card Grade in Reading				0.86**	
EQAO vs School Report Card Grades					
Grades Align w EQAO (base)					1.00
Grades Deflated					2.55**
Grades Inflated					0.61
Pseudo R-squared	0.0324	0.0383	0.0326	0.1975	0.0698
χ^2	187.50	222.08	189.18	1144.08	404.23

Note. **p < .01, *p < .05. Observations = 9,152. All model p-values = 0.000.

Comparison of five multinomial logistic regressions models. The base model is the same as Table E.4. The mediated models each show the effects of a different mediating variable(s) (Model 1= chronic absenteeism, Model 2= suspension history, Model 3= learning skills and report card grades, and Model 4= EQAO/grade alignment).

Appendix F: Model Comparison

Table F.5

Mediation Comparison Table - Math

	No IEP (N=9,582)	Accommodation (N=522)	Modified IEP (N=221)	Total (N=10,325)
Race (Identified by student or family)				
Black	871 (9.1%)	65 (12.5%)	43 (19.5%)	979 (9.5%)
East Asian	1,216 (12.7%)	45 (8.6%)	9 (4.1%)	1,270 (12.3%)
Latine	114 (1.2%)	7 (1.3%)	9 (4.1%)	130 (1.3%)
Middle Eastern	408 (4.3%)	22 (4.2%)	13 (5.9%)	443 (4.3%)
Multi-racial	1,109 (11.6%)	75 (14.4%)	29 (13.1%)	1,213 (11.7%)
South Asian	2,409 (25.1%)	66 (12.6%)	40 (18.1%)	2,515 (24.4%)
Southeast Asian	320 (3.3%)	7 (1.3%)	10 (4.5%)	337 (3.3%)
White	2,593 (27.1%)	203 (38.9%)	50 (22.6%)	2,846 (27.6%)
Race Info Not Available	542 (5.7%)	32 (6.1%)	18 (8.1%)	592 (5.7%)
Neighbourhood Income	6.014 (2.848)	5.738 (3.059)	4.882 (2.879)	5.975 (2.865)
Gender				
Female	5,139 (53.6%)	223 (42.7%)	110 (49.8%)	5,472 (53.0%)
Male	4,443 (46.4%)	299 (57.3%)	111 (50.2%)	4,853 (47.0%)
*Absenteeism in Gr3				
Absent <10%	8,533 (89.1%)	445 (85.2%)	164 (74.2%)	9,142 (88.5%)
Absent ≥10%	1,049 (10.9%)	77 (14.8%)	57 (25.8%)	1,183 (11.5%)
*Gr3 Suspensions				
None (base)	9,561 (99.8%)	521 (99.8%)	145 (97.7%)	10,298 (99.7%)
One or More	21 (0.2%)	1 (0.2%)	5 (2.3%)	27 (0.3%)
*Learning Skills in Gr3				
S, G, or E	9,520 (99.4%)	501 (96.0%)	201 (91.0%)	10,222 (99.0%)
Needs Improvement	62 (0.6%)	21 (4.0%)	20 (9.0%)	103 (1.0%)
*Gr3 Report Card Grade (Avg of all 5 Math strands)				
	78.199 (7.257)	71.067 (7.137)	65.215 (7.008)	77.561 (7.633)
*EQAO vs School Report Card Grades				
Scores Align	5,024 (52.4%)	289 (55.4%)	123 (55.7%)	5,436 (52.6%)
Grades Deflated	910 (9.5%)	98 (18.8%)	66 (29.9%)	1,074 (10.4%)
Grades Inflated	3,648 (38.1%)	135 (25.9%)	32 (14.5%)	3,815 (36.9%)

Note. The columns for each variable total 100%. Neighbourhood Income and Report Card Grades are continuous variables. The values above are each group's means and corresponding standard errors in parenthesis. *Indicates that the variable mediates (facilitates) the relationship between race/racism and the outcome.

Appendix F: Model Comparison

Table F.6

Mediation Comparison Table - Math

Modifications in Math	Base Model	Mediated Model 1	Mediated Model 2	Mediated Model 3	Mediated Model 4
Race					
Black	2.54**	2.67**	2.44**	1.75*	2.57**
East Asian	0.49	0.54	0.49	1.12	0.57
Latine	4.51**	3.97**	4.44**	3.88**	4.71**
Middle Eastern	1.82	1.88	1.76	1.61	1.88
Multi-Racial	1.71*	1.70*	1.66*	2.21**	1.88*
South Asian (base)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Southeast Asian	1.84	1.96	1.85	3.24**	2.21*
White	1.45	1.44	1.44	2.79**	1.70*
Race Not Available	2.06*	1.90*	2.04*	1.92*	2.18**
Neighbourhood Income	0.99**	0.99**	0.99**	1.00	0.99**
Gender					
Female (base)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Male	1.17	1.17	1.13	1.26	1.18
Gr3 Absences					
Absent <10% (base)		1.00			
Absent ≥10%		2.42**			
Gr3 Suspensions					
None (base)			1.00		
One or More			6.01**		
Gr3 Learning Skills					
E/G/S (base)				1.00	
Needs Improvement				2.06*	
Gr3 Report Card Grade in Reading				0.80**	
EQAO vs School Report Card Grades					
Grades Align w EQAO (base)					1.00
Grades Deflated					2.76**
Grades Inflated					0.36**

Continued on next page...

Appendix F – Model Comparison

Table F.6 – Continued

Accommodations in Math	Base Model	Mediated Model 1	Mediated Model 2	Mediated Model 3	Mediated Model 4
Race					
Black	2.53**	2.57**	2.54**	1.80**	2.53**
East Asian	1.44	1.47	1.43	2.34**	1.55*
Latine	2.11	2.03	2.12	1.73	2.16
Middle Eastern	1.89*	1.91*	1.90*	1.72*	1.93**
Multi-Racial	2.66**	2.66**	2.67**	2.99**	2.81**
Southeast Asian	0.79	0.80	0.79	1.05	0.87
South Asian (base)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
White	3.29**	3.28**	3.29**	4.45**	3.58**
Race Not Available	2.25**	2.20**	2.25**	2.15**	2.33**
Neighbourhood Income	0.99**	0.99**	0.99**	1.00	0.99**
Gender					
Female (base)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Male	1.60**	1.61**	1.61**	1.69**	1.59**
Gr3 Absences					
Absent <10% (base)		1.00			
Absent ≥10%		1.34*			
Gr3 Suspensions					
None (base)			1.00		
One or More			0.57		
Gr3 Learning Skills					
E/G/S (base)				1.00	
Needs Improvement				1.64	
Gr3 Report Card Grade in Reading				0.87**	
EQAO vs School Report Card Grades					
Grades Align w EQAO (base)					1.00
Grades Deflated					1.95**
Grades Inflated					0.63**
Pseudo R-squared	0.0319	0.0367	0.0334	0.1845	0.0555
χ^2	199.10	229.03	208.33	1152.40	346.70

Note. **p < .01, *p < .05. Observations = 10,325. All model p-values = 0.000.

Comparison of five multinomial logistic regressions models. The base model is the same as Table E.6.

The mediated models each show the effects of a different mediating variable(s) (Model 1= chronic absenteeism, Model 2= suspension history, Model 3= learning skills and report card grades, and Model 4= EQAO/grade alignment).

Appendix G: EQAO and Report Card Grade Mis/Alignment by Race

Table G.1

Descriptive Statistics of EQAO & Report Card Grade Alignment in Gr3 Reading

	Grades Deflated (N=1,493)	Grades & EQAO Align (N=5,055)	Grades Inflated (N=2,331)	Total (N=8,879)
Race				
Black	164 (11.0%)	479 (9.5%)	215 (9.2%)	858 (9.7%)
East Asian	194 (13.0%)	650 (12.9%)	276 (11.8%)	1,120 (12.6%)
Latine	24 (1.6%)	62 (1.2%)	25 (1.1%)	111 (1.3%)
Middle Eastern	77 (5.2%)	198 (3.9%)	112 (4.8%)	387 (4.4%)
Multi-racial	146 (9.8%)	546 (10.8%)	260 (11.2%)	952 (10.7%)
South Asian	473 (31.7%)	1,348 (26.7%)	583 (25.0%)	2,404 (27.1%)
Southeast Asian	52 (3.5%)	183 (3.6%)	86 (3.7%)	321 (3.6%)
White	273 (18.3%)	1,307 (25.9%)	639 (27.4%)	2,219 (25.0%)
Race Not Available	90 (6.0%)	282 (5.6%)	135 (5.8%)	507 (5.7%)
Neighbourhood Income	5.662 (2.791)	5.900 (2.881)	5.941 (2.825)	5.871 (2.853)
Gender				
Female	733 (49.1%)	2,713 (53.7%)	1,219 (52.3%)	4,665 (52.5%)
Male	760 (50.9%)	2,342 (46.3%)	1,112 (47.7%)	4,214 (47.5%)

Note. The columns for each variable total 100%. Neighbourhood Income is a continuous variable. The values above are each group's means and corresponding standard errors in parenthesis.

Appendix G: EQAO and Report Card Grade Mis/Alignment by Race

Table G.2

Estimates the Relative Risk Ratio (RRR) and Predicted Probabilities (PP) of Having Grades Inflated or Deflated Relative to EQAO Results in Gr 3 Reading

	Grades Deflated			Grades Inflated		
	RRR	(95% CI)	PP	RRR	(95% CI)	PP
Race						
Black	1.59**	(1.26-2.01)	19%**	0.93	(0.76-1.13)	25%**
East Asian	1.41**	(1.15-1.74)	17%**	0.87	(0.73-1.03)	25%**
Latine	1.77*	(1.08-2.90)	21%**	0.82	(0.51-1.32)	23%**
Middle Eastern	1.81**	(1.34-2.44)	20%**	1.16	(0.90-1.50)	29%**
Multi-racial	1.28**	(1.02-1.60)	15%**	0.98	(0.82-1.17)	27%**
South Asian	1.65*	(1.39-1.95)	20%**	0.89	(0.77-1.02)	24%**
Southeast Asian	1.33	(0.95-1.86)	16%**	0.96	(0.73-1.27)	27%**
White (base)	1.00		12%**	1.00		29%**
Race Not Available	1.51**	(1.15-1.99)	18%**	0.98	(0.78-1.24)	27%**
Neighbourhood Income						
	0.99	(0.97-1.01)		1.00	(0.98-1.02)	
Gender						
Female (base)	1.0			1.0		
Male	1.19**	(1.06-1.34)		1.06	(0.96-1.17)	

Note. **p < .01, *p < .05, Total observations = 8,879

Pseudo R² = 0.0044, LR chi² (20) = 75.73, Prob > chi² = 0.000

Relative Risk Ratios (RRR) compare the likelihood of an event occurring relative to the base group. If the RRR > 1, the outcome is more likely to occur relative to the base group. If the RRR < 1, the outcome is less likely to occur relative to the base group. **Predicted Probabilities (PP)** show the probability of an outcome occurring relative to 0. PPs are an absolute measure. **Confidence Intervals (CI)** represent the range in which the true RRR is likely to be, based on data. If the study were repeated multiple times, the interval would contain the true RRR in 95% of the time.

Includes: Students in the Board from grades 3-6 who did not have IEPs in Gr 3.

Excludes: Students who scored Level 1 or below on Gr 3 EQAO in Reading (to isolate inappropriate initiations of modifications), French Immersion students (they do not do Gr 3 EQAO testing in Reading), and the exclusions listed in Chapter 2.

Appendix G: EQAO and Report Card Grade Mis/Alignment by Race

Table G.3

Descriptive Statistics of EQAO & Report Card Grade Alignment in Gr3 Writing

	Grades Deflated (N=2,391)	Grades & EQAO Align (N=5,169)	Grades Inflated (N=1,592)	Total (N=9,152)
Race (Identified by student or family)				
Black	320 (13.4%)	468 (9.1%)	127 (8.0%)	915 (10.0%)
East Asian	292 (12.2%)	652 (12.6%)	206 (12.9%)	1,150 (12.6%)
Latine	38 (1.6%)	60 (1.2%)	18 (1.1%)	116 (1.3%)
Middle Eastern	122 (5.1%)	227 (4.4%)	59 (3.7%)	408 (4.5%)
Multi-racial	224 (9.4%)	565 (10.9%)	186 (11.7%)	975 (10.7%)
South Asian	748 (31.3%)	1,357 (26.3%)	355 (22.3%)	2,460 (26.9%)
Southeast Asian	73 (3.1%)	194 (3.8%)	59 (3.7%)	326 (3.6%)
White	415 (17.4%)	1,349 (26.1%)	492 (30.9%)	2,256 (24.7%)
Race Info Not Available	159 (6.6%)	297 (5.7%)	90 (5.7%)	546 (6.0%)
Neighbourhood Income	5.341 (2.780)	5.952 (2.862)	6.187 (2.863)	5.833 (2.857)
Gender				
Female	1,084 (45.3%)	2,733 (52.9%)	969 (60.9%)	4,786 (52.3%)
Male	1,307 (54.7%)	2,436 (47.1%)	623 (39.1%)	4,366 (47.7%)

Note. The columns for each variable total 100%. Neighbourhood Income is a continuous variable. The values above are each group's means and corresponding standard errors in parenthesis.

Appendix G: EQAO and Report Card Grade Mis/Alignment by Race

Table G.4

Estimates the Relative Risk Ratio (RRR) and Predicted Probabilities (PP) of Having Grades Inflated or Deflated Relative to EQAO Results in Gr 3 Writing

	Grades Deflated			Grades Inflated		
	RRR	(95% CI)	PP	RRR	(95% CI)	PP
Race						
Black	1.88**	(1.55-2.27)	33%**	0.79*	(0.62-0.99)	15%**
East Asian	1.38**	(1.15-1.65)	26%**	0.88	(0.73-1.07)	18%**
Latine	1.77**	(1.16-2.70)	31%**	0.89	(0.52-1.54)	17%**
Middle Eastern	1.53**	(1.19-1.96)	28%**	0.75	(0.55-1.03)	15%**
Multi-racial	1.22*	(1.01-1.48)	23%**	0.91	(0.75-1.11)	19%**
South Asian	1.62**	(1.40-1.88)	30%**	0.74**	(0.63-0.87)	15%**
Southeast Asian	1.09	(0.81-1.47)	22%**	0.87	(0.64-1.19)	18%**
White (base)	1.00		20%**	1.00		21%**
Race Not Available	1.61**	(1.29-2.02)	29%**	0.85	(0.65-1.10)	16%**
Neighbourhood Income	0.95**	(0.93-0.97)		1.02	(1.00-1.04)	
Gender						
Female (base)	1.00			1.00		
Male	1.35**	(1.23-1.49)		0.72 **	(0.64-0.81)	

Note. **p < .01, *p < .05, Total observations = 9,152

Pseudo R² = 0.0170, LR chi² (20) = 303.66, Prob > chi² = 0.000

Relative Risk Ratios (RRR) compare the likelihood of an event occurring relative to the base group. If the RRR > 1, the outcome is more likely to occur relative to the base group. If the RRR < 1, the outcome is less likely to occur relative to the base group. **Predicted Probabilities (PP)** show the probability of an outcome occurring relative to 0. PPs are an absolute measure. **Confidence Intervals (CI)** represent the range in which the true RRR is likely to be, based on data. If the study were repeated multiple times, the interval would contain the true RRR in 95% of the time.

Includes: Students in the Board from grades 3-6 who did not have IEPs in Gr 3.

Excludes: Students who scored Level 1 or below on Gr 3 EQAO in Writing (to isolate inappropriate initiations of modifications), French Immersion students (they do not do Gr 3 EQAO testing in Writing), and the exclusions listed in Chapter 2.

Appendix G: EQAO and Report Card Grade Mis/Alignment by Race

Table G.5

Descriptive Statistics of EQAO & Report Card Grade Alignment in Gr3 Math

	Grades Deflated (N=1,074)	Grades & EQAO Align (N=5,436)	Grades Inflated (N=3,815)	Total (N=10,325)
Race				
Black	139 (12.9%)	530 (9.7%)	310 (8.1%)	979 (9.5%)
East Asian	100 (9.3%)	666 (12.3%)	504 (13.2%)	1,270 (12.3%)
Latine	19 (1.8%)	67 (1.2%)	44 (1.2%)	130 (1.3%)
Middle Eastern	62 (5.8%)	222 (4.1%)	159 (4.2%)	443 (4.3%)
Multi-racial	128 (11.9%)	602 (11.1%)	483 (12.7%)	1,213 (11.7%)
South Asian	339 (31.6%)	1,336 (24.6%)	840 (22.0%)	2,515 (24.4%)
Southeast Asian	24 (2.2%)	172 (3.2%)	141 (3.7%)	337 (3.3%)
White	195 (18.2%)	1,535 (28.2%)	1,116 (29.3%)	2,846 (27.6%)
Race Info Not Available	68 (6.3%)	306 (5.6%)	218 (5.7%)	592 (5.7%)
Neighbourhood Income	5.412 (2.823)	6.001 (2.883)	6.099 (2.833)	5.975 (2.865)
Gender				
Female	534 (49.7%)	2,899 (53.3%)	2,039 (53.4%)	5,472 (53.0%)
Male	139 (12.9%)	530 (9.7%)	310 (8.1%)	979 (9.5%)

Note. The columns for each variable total 100%. Neighbourhood Income is a continuous variable. The values above are each group's means and corresponding standard errors in parenthesis.

Appendix G: EQAO/Report Card Grade Mis/Alignment by Race

Table G.6

Estimates the Relative Risk Ratio (RRR) and Predicted Probabilities (PP) of Having Grades Inflated or Deflated Relative to EQAO Results in Gr 3 Math

	Grades Deflated			Grades Inflated		
	RRR	(95% CI)	PP	RRR	(95% CI)	PP
Race						
Black	1.77**	(1.37-2.28)	13%**	0.82*	(0.69-0.97)	32%**
East Asian	1.12	(0.87-1.46)	8%**	1.05	(0.91-1.20)	40%**
Latine	1.98*	(1.16-3.38)	14%**	0.91	(0.62-1.35)	34%**
Middle Eastern	1.96**	(1.42-2.71)	13%**	1.00	(0.80-1.24)	36%**
Multi-racial	1.59**	(1.24-2.03)	11%**	1.11	(0.96-1.28)	40%**
South Asian	1.82**	(1.50-2.22)	13%**	0.87*	(0.77-0.98)	34%**
Southeast Asian	0.99	(0.63-1.57)	7%**	1.14	(0.90-1.45)	42%**
White (base)	1.00		7%**			39%**
Race Not Available	1.62**	(1.20-2.20)	11%**	0.99	(0.82-1.20)	37%**
Neighbourhood Income	0.96**	(0.93-0.98)		1.01	(0.99-1.02)	
Gender						
Female (base)	1.00			1.00		
Male	1.14	(1.00-1.30)		1.00	(0.92-1.09)	

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, Total observations = 10,325

Pseudo $R^2 = 0.0075$, LR $\chi^2(20) = 144.97$, Prob $> \chi^2 = 0.000$

Relative Risk Ratios (RRR) compare the likelihood of an event occurring relative to the base group. If the $RRR > 1$, the outcome is more likely to occur relative to the base group. If the $RRR < 1$, the outcome is less likely to occur relative to the base group. **Predicted Probabilities (PP)** show the probability of an outcome occurring relative to 0. PPs are an absolute measure. **Confidence Intervals (CI)** represent the range in which the true RRR is likely to be, based on data. If the study were repeated multiple times, the interval would contain the true RRR in 95% of the time.

Includes: Students in the Board from grades 3-6 who did not have IEPs in Gr 3. French Immersion students (they complete Gr 3 EQAO testing in Math).

Excludes: Students who scored Level 1 or below on Gr 3 EQAO in Math (to isolate inappropriate initiations of modifications), and the exclusions listed in Chapter 2.