Measuring Education Quality: Bringing Exceptional Learning Front and Centre

In a recent *Education Canada* article, Christa Freiler points to the provocative work of Judy Lupart, who argues that Canadian schools have evolved to include a dual approach to education: one for students with exceptional learning needs,[1] and one for all other students.[2] At all levels – provincial, regional, and local – the regular and special education models operate under separate bureaucracies, policies and procedures, and funding frameworks. Each system has its own knowledge base and professional networks[3] and occupies distinct positions on the subject of educational change: where advocates for school reform tend to de-emphasize the issues surrounding students with exceptional learning needs, those "instrumental in advancing the notion of the progressive inclusion of students with exceptional learning needs" devote little attention to general education reforms.[4]

Lupart's analysis can be taken a step further to reveal two noticeably different approaches to measuring and reporting on education quality within school systems. Almost all Canadian provinces and territories, and many of the school districts within them, report annually to the public on key performance indicators. Some, such as data on school completion rates, are silent on the topic of students with exceptional learning needs. Others, such as data on student achievement in literacy and mathematics, rarely report on achievement among students with exceptional learning needs. The picture of education quality and student achievement then becomes one of 'regular' students, while measures of the broader topic of inclusion and achievement among students with exceptionalities are incorporated into infrequent provincial/ territorial and local reviews of special education.

In the absence of consistent information about the achievement of students with exceptional learning needs and school systems' progress toward inclusive education, forming a clear picture of what Lupart refers to as the "second dominant system" within Canadian schools becomes a difficult and often confusing process. We know a great deal about the number of students with exceptionalities attending Canadian schools and can track the dramatic increase, especially in the number of students with exceptional learning needs, over the past twenty years. Accomplishments and challenges related to school systems' provision of access to special education programs and services are also relatively easy to locate, as are data on trends in the number of students receiving education in regular and special education classroom settings.[5]

These data provide important information on education systems' progress towards ensuring that students with exceptional learning needs have equal rights of access and opportunity, but they do not necessarily bring us closer to answering the more complex question of how school systems or students with exceptional learning needs are doing. There are huge challenges in reaching what Crawford refers to as a "clear picture of the present educational situation of students with intellectual and other disabilities." These include:
– lack of focus on disability in provincial/territorial administrative data systems;
– lack of detailed focus on education and disability in most major statistical surveys;
– general scarcity of research on issues of disability and inclusive education in Canada;
– infrequency and lack of comparability between research and provincial/territorial reviews of special education.[6]

Access to comprehensive and reliable data on issues of disability and inclusive education is essential. But what data will be most powerful for improving our ability to make effective decisions for students with exceptional learning needs and advancing high quality inclusive education for all students?

Alongside important measures of students' access to education we need "to go beyond the juridically defined individual of liberal theory whose rights are realized, but [who] may still encounter exclusion."[7] We need, for example, to develop a better understanding of the impacts of policy on educational outcomes, create rich sources of data that encompass the physical (e.g., schools and classrooms) and relational dimensions of inclusion, and fashion new mechanisms, both within and outside of education systems, to ensure "that the perspectives of children and youth with disabilities are adequately represented."[8]

These data represent a missing dimension in our current understanding, not just of the experiences of students with exceptional learning needs, but of the overall quality of education systems in Canada. To truly progress toward equity and inclusive education, we need to bring them front and centre where they can become a powerful part of eliminating the inconsistencies in our efforts to serve the needs of all students.[9] ▌

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Notes
1 This term includes behavioural, communication, learning, physical or multiple disabilities.
2 C. Freiler, "Building Inclusive Cities and Communities," *Education Canada* 48 (Winter 2007/08): 41, citing J. Lupart, "Students with Exceptional Learning Needs: At-Risk, Utmost." Paper prepared for the Pan-Canadian Education Research Symposium: Children and Youth at Risk, Ottawa, 2000:2.
3 J. Lupart, "Inching Toward Inclusion: The Excellence/Equity Dilemma in our Schools." Paper prepared for the first Pan Canadian Education Research Agenda (PCERA) Symposium, Ottawa, 1999.
4 J. Lupart, 2000, 9.
5 Canadian Council on Learning, *Equality in the Classroom: The Educational Placement of Students with Disabilities* (CCL, 2007).
6 C. Crawford, "Scoping Inclusive Education for Canadian Students with Intellectual and Other Disabilities," (L'Institut Roeher Institute, 2005).
7 M. Bach, *Social Inclusion as Solidarity: Rethinking the Child Rights Agenda* (Laidlaw Foundation, 2002).
8 Ibid., 19.
9 J. Lupart, 2000, 10