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Are Ontario Educators Prepared for the Diverse Classrooms of Today?

By

Elaine Willick-Kerwin

A Major Research Paper
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Faculty of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Education
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2024

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Are Ontario Educators Prepared for the Classrooms of Today?

by

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September 6, 2024

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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ABSTRACT

This purpose of this major paper is to understand how Ontario educators are being prepared for the diverse classrooms of today. Educators today have increasing barriers that are preventing them from reaching all their students in an effective way. This paper will explore and highlight the different barriers that educators in Ontario are facing including: increasing needs in the classroom, decreases in funding, lack of staff and support levels, fluctuating class sizes, behaviour issues, lack of resources and training opportunities from pre-service to in-service educators, and the overall mental health impact of teaching today. This paper is crucial to understand how diverse needs of students in classrooms impact educators. The conclusions may also be used to inform school boards about difficulties and barriers their educators are facing to inform next steps and possible changes that could be made.

Key Words: special education in Ontario; inclusion; inclusive practices exceptionalities, issues in education; barriers to educators, support levels

DEDICATION

To my daughters, for all the times you waited so I could “just write some more.”

To my colleagues in education, hopefully together, we will see some positive change in the remainder of our careers.

To my friends, for always seeing my worth, and being my cheerleaders along the way.

To Derek, for always seeing the positive side of things when I was not always able and for encouraging me to continue.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I first started this Masters journey, I was going to do a course-based master's program but upon entering my first course and being inspired by my first Professor, Dr. Greig, I changed pathways, at first into a thesis, and then finally into a major paper.

Thank you to Professor Greig, for inspiring me through this journey from my very first course to my last two courses and of course my journey of changes and supporting me along the way. It had been amazing getting to work with you for the past four years.

Thank you to Susan Holloway, for being a part of my major paper committee and for your thoughtful feedback throughout my two different defences.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS/SYMBOLS

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
EA	Educational Assistant
CYW	Child and Youth Worker
ELL	English Language Learners
ETFO	Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario
IEP	Individual Education Plan
IPRC	Identification, Placement and Review Committee
LD	Learning Disability
MOE	Ministry of Education
OECTA	Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association
OME	Ontario Ministry of Education
OCT	Ontario College of Teachers
OSSTF	Ontario Secondary School Teacher's Federation
OT	Occupational Therapist
PRT	Program Resource Teacher
PT	Physiotherapist
SEA	Special Equipment Amount
SLP	Speech and Language Pathologist
SW	Social Worker

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The education system in Ontario aims to be an inclusive system. In 2009, Ontario created its *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*. The overall goal was to help identify and address discriminatory biases and barriers to support student achievement and wellbeing (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2009). One of the three goals of the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* is to “support positive learning environments so that all students can feel engaged in and empowered by what they are learning; supported by the teachers and staff from whom they are learning; and welcome in the environment in which they are learning” (OME, 2009). Research shows that there are barriers that prevent some students from being properly supported by educators and barriers that prevent educators from doing their jobs more effectively. Some of the barriers that prevent successful inclusive teaching practices involve a decrease in classroom support through lack of educator in-services, resources, educational assistants, and limited numbers of resource teachers (Brackenreed, 2008; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013; Lindsay et al., 2013; Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association [OECTA], n.d.; People for Education, 2018; Symes & Humprey, 2012; Webster & Valeo, 2011). Other factors that are preventing successful inclusive teaching practices include classroom sizes, behavioral concerns (Del Riccio, 2021; Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario [ETFO], 2018; Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario [ETFO], 2023; Hutchinson et al., 2015; Lindsay et al., 2014; Montgomery, 2018; Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association [OECTA], 2018; OSSTF, 2023; Santor et al., 2019), students with exceptionalities and various needs (Autism Ontario, 2020; Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada [CADDAC], n.d.; Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives [CCPA], 2022; Dare & Nowicki, 2015; Eriks-

Brophy & Whittingham, 2013; Killoran et al., 2013; Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario [LDAO], 2018; Lindsay et al., 2014; McCrimmon, 2015; People for Education, 2017; Still et al, 2016; Symes & Humphrey, 2012; Webster & Valeo, 2011)., and there is also a mental health component (ETFO, 2018; Johnson et al., 2005; Koenig et al., 2018; Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association [OECTA], 2017; The Ontario Secondary School Teacher's Federation [OSSTF], 2023; Santor et al., 2019) that is affecting Ontario educators.

Before I explore in more depth the various challenges and barriers to inclusive education in Ontario, I will provide the reader with definitions of the key terms used throughout this paper beginning with categories of exceptionalities.

Definitions of Key Terms

Categories of Exceptionalities. The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) recognizes five categories of exceptionalities. These categories include behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical, and multiple. The communicational category includes autism, deaf and hard of hearing, language impairment, speech impairment, and learning disability. The intellectual category includes giftedness, mild intellectual disability, and developmental disability. Physical disability includes any severe physical limitations and students that are blind and low vision (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017).

Differentiated Instruction (DI). DI is a shift in pedagogy from program-based to student-based. Educators meet the needs of each student by making changes to their pedagogy, this allows them to acknowledge where their students' interests lie, their learning profile, and what level they function at (*Education for All*, 2005).

Exceptional pupil. The OME defines an exceptional pupil as someone “whose behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical, or multiple exceptionalities are such that

he or she is considered to need placement in a special education program” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017).

Inclusive Education. The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) states that inclusive education “is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 4).

Special Education Program. According to the OME, a special education program is “an educational program that is based on and modified by the results of continuous assessment and evaluation and that includes a plan containing special objectives and an outline of educational services that meets the needs of the exceptional pupil” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017, p. A3).

Special Education Services. Special education services are “facilities and resources, including support personnel and equipment, necessary for developing and implementing a special education program” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017, p. A3).

Individual Education Plan (IEP). An individual education plan outlines services that an individual student needs based on assessment data that looks at their strengths and needs. It includes accommodations that can be used to help the student achieve their goals and can include modifications and/or alternative to curriculum expectations. The IEP is a working document and is developed for every student that is recognized as being exceptional through an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004).

Educational Assistant (EA). Educational assistants, also known as teaching assistants, play a pivotal role in supporting students with their various needs. They help to support

independence towards student goals, inclusion, well-being, and communication and collaboration. EA support in schools is very fluid and changes based on both student and school needs (Thames Valley District School Board, n.d.).

The Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC). The IPRC process will decide if a student is exceptional and what type of placement type is best for them. There are five types of placements including regular class with indirect support, regular class with resource assistance, a regular class with withdrawal assistance, a special education class with partial integration, or a full-time special education class. Special education programs and services will be considered to fit the student's needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007b).

Importance of the Study

This study is crucial to understand how diverse student needs in classrooms impact educators, both in terms of the way they teach, the impact it has on students with needs and all the students in their classroom. This paper will also consider ways to improve the inclusive education system in Ontario to ensure that the needs of all students are being met. The information gathered can be used to inform various educational stakeholders including the Ontario Ministry of Education, school board trustees, directors and superintendents of education, school boards, different educational organizations, and groups, as well as educators, parents, and students about the difficulties and barriers educators face with inclusive education when the proper supports are not in place. This study will help to provide recommendations on different things that educators might need to be able to support their diverse students. Lastly, this study will also examine the limitations and implications that have emerged out of this research.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore the existing research that has been completed on classrooms in Ontario, the challenges that educators are facing within them, and the impact that the challenges are having on educators. Through a comprehensive review of previous studies, along with government documents, and union and education group reports, the goal of this paper is to identify all the different barriers that impacting educators in their classrooms and how those barriers are impacting them and the students that they teach.

Research Questions

This study looks to understand the potential barriers educators are facing with having diverse, inclusive classrooms in Ontario. In order to do so I will investigate the following research question:

1. What are the barriers and challenges that educators are facing in the diverse classrooms in Ontario and how are they impacting educators?
2. The following sub-question will also be investigated: Are educators prepared to meet and support the diverse learning needs of their students in the inclusive classroom setting?

Locating Myself in the Study

My interest and relation to this study are motivated by two main factors: one as a parent of a student with some needs and two, in my role as a program resource teacher (PRT) in an Ontario school board. Since I started my teaching career almost 20 years ago, I have seen the needs of students rise and the amount of support, including funding, available decrease. Students that were hovering between needing special education services and extra support were able to get some when I first started and now, most support is given to students with behavioral concerns or students that have the highest types of needs, students with high level autism, and

severe developmental delays. The problem of adequately resourcing students with needs cuts across the educational context in Ontario. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) recognizes that students with disabilities in the province of Ontario face barriers when it comes to accessing educational services and equal access (OHRC, 2018). This inequity crosses all levels of education from primary to post-secondary and involves “inadequate resources and supports in the classroom, long waiting lists for assessments, negative attitudes and stereotypes, physical inaccessibility, inappropriate requests for medical information” (OHRC, 2018, p. 9).

However, even with significant needs, the goal in schools is to always reduce support as students get older and move up through the grades. As a resource educator, I have first-hand experience in seeing the lack of support in place in classrooms, the lack of training to help educators understand the different exceptionalities, the students that are struggling inside our classrooms, and the high stress levels that our educators are experiencing trying to teach all these types of learners, usually on their own. It is important that Ontario starts putting more support and resources in place for educators so that they can reach all students. It is important that students be supported as much as they can be at the elementary level so that they are prepared both mentally and academically as they move through the school system. Based on my years’ experience as an educator it is very clear to me that educators aren’t adequately supported in their classrooms in terms of training, resources, educational assistants, and resource teachers so that they can avoid stress, burnout, and wanting to leave the profession.

As a special education resource educator, I feel that my personal experience has allowed me to see the impacts of the cuts to funding each year and see how it affects the different students that I support. Over the past several years, I have seen an increase in referrals that I have had to make for students through the different paraprofessional services including

SLP, OT, and PT. I am seeing students that are sitting on some service lists for an entire school year. Sometimes students do not have assessments completed until they are older and when that happens, often services are limited, and students are recommended for SEA equipment to help them with their challenge instead of direct support. For example, often OT's will recommend computers for students that have weak fine motor skills, as older students' habits can be more difficult to change through active therapy. Also, for students that have memory concerns, a SLP might recommend technology to have a student use speech to text to get their thoughts out quickly to complete writing assignments.

Other ways I have seen cuts to education are in my own position. For example, in June of 2024, my half-time position at my two different schools was cut from 0.50 to 0.40, leaving just 0.80 instead of a 1.0FTE. One school did lose one student with high needs, but it also lost a full-time EA. The other school gained two new students entering JK with high needs and it lost 0.20 of a vice-principal position. It does not seem that the funding model makes sense. Each year, more time is carved away from our most vulnerable students. The lack of resources and support in our classrooms is something that I have struggled with for many years, and I am passionate about being able to change this to help our students. Like all researchers, I understand, and I am aware of the possibility that I am influenced by my own firsthand experiences in the education system.

Organization of Paper

The first chapter of this paper introduces Ontario's inclusive education system, definitions of key terms that will be used throughout the paper, the importance of the study, the purpose statement, the research questions, and how I locate myself in this study. The second chapter includes the methodology section which describes the research design and the selection

criteria for the literature review. The third chapter focuses on a review of literature with special emphasis on the barriers or themes surrounding educators and inclusive education, the diverse classrooms in Ontario, and the impact they are having on educators. Chapter four will include a discussion and summary of the literature review, along with the limitations in the current literature. Lastly, chapter five will conclude the paper with implications that have come out of the themes from the literature, along with recommendations for future research and ways to create change in education, followed by the conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

The research on education practices in Ontario shows that there are many challenges and barriers that prevent Ontario educators from effectively reaching the diverse range of students in their classrooms. To investigate the barriers further, a thorough literature review will be conducted to identify the challenges that educators are facing in the diverse classrooms of today. The research also seeks to develop a deeper insight into why these challenges are taking place, and to seek possible solutions for change.

Research reveals that there is a gap when it comes to research that combines all the challenges that educators today are facing in their classrooms. For example, there is research on violence and harassment (Del Riccio, 2021; ETFO, 2018; ETFO, 2023; Hutchinson et al., 2015; Lindsay et al., 2014; Montgomery, 2018; OECTA, 2018; OSSTF, 2023; Santor et al., 2019) or special needs students (Autism Ontario, 2020; CADDAC, n.d.; CCPA, 2022; Dare & Nowicki, 2015; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013; Killoran et al., 2013; LDAO, 2018; Lindsay et al., 2014; McCrimmon, 2015; People for Education, 2017; Still et al, 2016; Symes & Humphrey, 2012; Webster & Valeo, 2011)., or educator well-being (ETFO, 2018; Johnson et al., 2005; Koenig et al., 2018; OECTA, 2017; OSSTF, 2023; Santor et al., 2019) that helps to show there are issues but there is not research that puts all the different barriers together to show just how big the challenges in Ontario schools are. By putting the relevant research together, it is the hope of the researcher to be able to answer the central research question of this paper: What are the barriers and challenges that educators are facing in the diverse classrooms in Ontario and how are they impacting educators?

Research Design

A thematic approach will be taken to identify the different challenges that are preventing successful classroom inclusion. I will also be identifying and providing some insight into the challenges educators face when being placed in these diverse classroom settings. Critical sociology will be the theoretical lens to guide this study.

With the aim of identifying, analyzing, and exploring key themes on the topic of inclusion in Ontario classrooms, a comprehensive search of literature was conducted for this study using the Omni Academic Search Tool and Google Scholar, with keywords including history of special education, special education inclusion, inclusive education, special education teachers, students in special education, categories of disabilities, prevalence of disabilities, education support, educational assistant support, resource teachers, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), behaviour in Ontario classrooms, violence against educators in Ontario, students with behaviour, teacher training in Ontario, students with exceptionalities in Ontario, teacher resources in Ontario. All keywords were searched along with Ontario, Canada. Google search was utilized to locate information and data on learning disabilities and autism in Ontario and Canada. Official data and documents were analyzed from the Ministry of Education website for Ontario, Canada, along with information from OCT. Other inclusions for this study are educator Union and Federation studies such the ones conducted by OECTA, ETFO, OSSTF, and People for Education. When considering selection criteria and inclusions, most of the literature used for this study is from the last ten years, with some exceptions made to highlight historical reforms and policies. After reviewing the articles for relevance, additional articles were then found by identifying and locating other references cited in articles that were reviewed. Due to time and space constraints, exclusions include information from provinces outside of Ontario except for studies from other parts of Canada that mentioned aspects of

Ontario's school system within them. Ontario was selected because it is the province that the researcher currently teaches in.

Framework: Critical Sociology

This study takes theoretical inspiration from the broader tradition of critical sociology, which is concerned with how people are organized within a society in a way that some are excluded, and some are included. It questions power relations and how “social interests are being served by existing arrangements and dominant discourses” (Riddell, 2014, p. 97).

In an institutional sense, we can begin to understand how various benefits are provided to some individuals and not others. For example, in looking at the educational institution, critical sociology does not believe that they reduce inequalities, it believes that “the educational system reinforces and perpetuates social inequalities arising from differences in class, gender, race, and ethnicity” (Little, 2016, p. 676). In Ontario schools, we can see inequalities in play on many levels from our students, who are not getting the support they need, to our educators who face numerous challenges in trying to do their jobs. Paradigms and assumptions have been narrated to fit certain agendas. For example, students with behavioural concerns can be blamed on the educators for not having classroom control, instead of focusing on the real issue that perhaps behaviour is a “by-product of unequal social relations” (Riddell, 2014, p. 103).

Using this theoretical approach, we can rethink and question the unbalanced dynamics of power and the power relations that are heavily influencing our organizations and institutions such as our school system.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ontario is a province that uses the inclusive education model. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education, inclusive education is envisioned as a system in “which: all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected; every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). Existing literature shows that educators generally believe in the premise of inclusive education but not without the proper supports, resources, and training in place (Brackenreed, 2008; ETFO, 2017; ETFO, 2023a; Lindsay et al., 2013; OECTA, 2017; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013). However, existing literature also shows that many educators are ill-prepared for the classrooms of today (Brackenreed, 2008; D’Intino & Wang, 2020; Lindsay et al., 2013; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013; Killoran et al., 2013; McCrimmon, 2015; People for Education, 2018). In sum, today’s classrooms are filled with a wide range of learners, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for many educators to meet all the diverse needs with the limited supports and resources available.

When reviewing the literature, there was a significant amount of research on inclusive education in Canada, while research specific to Ontario varied (Brackenreed, 2008; Lindsay et al., 2013; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013 & Webster & Valeo, 2011). Most research in Ontario focused on educators’ barriers with meeting the needs of individuals with exceptionalities, rather than meeting the needs of all diverse types of students that might be found in a classroom. Student needs can range from various identified exceptionalities, students needing accommodations, modifications, or alternative programming, students with behaviour

and mental health concerns, and English language learners (ELL), just to name some of the diverse students' educators teach in their classrooms.

In the literature review some major challenges and barriers emerged with respect to Ontario's classrooms and educators' inability to meet the needs for all students, and the impact that the challenges are having on educators. The first barrier involves the decrease in classroom support in terms of special education teachers and educational assistants but also in overall class sizes (Brackenreed, 2008; Government of Ontario, 2020; Lindsay et al., 2013; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013). Secondly, behaviour issues are a cause for concern with educators being harassed and violently attacked while in the classroom (ETFO, 2018; ETFO, 2023; Hutchinson et al., 2015; Lindsay et al., 2014; OECTA, 2017; OSSTF, 2023; & Santor et al., 2019). Another major barrier is the lack of training and resources available to educators. Both pre-service and in-service training appears inadequate when it comes to understanding all the different types of students that an educator will be exposed to and expected to educate in their classroom (Brackenreed, 2008; D'Intino & Wang, 2020; Del Riccio, 2021; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013; Grierson & Woloshyn, 2013; Killoran et al., 2013; Kise, 2006, as cited in Grierson & Woloshyn, 2013; McCrimmon, 2015; University of Windsor, 2021; Webster & Valeo, 2011) Lastly, another barrier in the way of educators being prepared for the classroom today has to do with their own wellbeing. Educators are burning out due to stress and mental health concerns stemming from what they are experiencing in the classroom (ETFO, 2018; Johnson et al., 2005; Koenig et al., 2018; OECTA, 2017; OSSTF, 2023; Santor et al., 2019). See the appendix for a visual representation of the four barriers and challenges.

Classroom Support and Class Sizes

Through increased needs for support and changing class sizes, educators are finding it difficult to provide the students in their classrooms with the time and support they need to succeed (Brackenreed, 2008; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013; ETFO, 2017; ETFO, 2023; Government of Ontario, 2020; Lindsay et al., 2013; OSSTF, 2023). When classroom supports are decreased, there is a barrier to the success of inclusive education (Brackenreed, 2008; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013; Lindsay et al., 2014, Symes & Humprey, 2012). It is difficult for educators to meet the diverse individual needs in their classrooms, and they require the support of educational assistants, special education teachers, and smaller class sizes. I begin with a brief comment on special education teachers.

Special Education Teachers

Extra support to help students with formally identified exceptionalities is lacking in Ontario, most schools have a part-time or fulltime special education teacher that works with students at a 36:1 ratio (People for Education, 2018). However, in an updated report on special education, the ratio of special education teachers to students is now at 39:1 (People for Education, 2024), showing a small decrease in funding.

Educational Assistants (Teaching Assistants)

Although support level ratios for educational assistants (EA) to students is better than the ratio of special education teachers to students, it remains an issue. According to People for Education (2018), in Ontario, EAs work with students at a 19:1; (2024) while only 84% of elementary schools in Ontario have a full-time educational assistant. A 2023 OSSTF study indicated that 69% of the participants reported that supports in the classrooms had decreased,

along with in-school supports (OSSTF, 2023). Decreased support levels seem to be consistent from the elementary to the secondary level in Ontario.

With students that have formal identifications being prioritized, students placed on Individual Education Plans (IEP) without formal identifications are getting little support (People for Education, 2018). For both students and educators to be successful in inclusive classrooms, studies suggest a strong need for educational or teaching assistant support especially among students that have exceptionalities (Brackenreed, 2008; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013; Lindsey et al., 2014, Symes & Humprey, 2012). In People for Education's 2021 annual report, Ontario principals saw that "educational supports skyrocketed, but there was no corresponding increase in human resources" (People for Education, 2021, p.15). Clearly, there seems to be a recognition that overall support for students with exceptionalities needs to be increased, given that this has happened as far as educational supports go, but at the same time there is a political unwillingness to fund human resources to help students with exceptionalities succeed. It goes without saying that both types of support are needed to adequately support students with exceptionalities.

Two studies completed in Ontario, one on autism and one on hearing loss show the need for educational assistant support. For example, a semi-structured interview was completed by thirteen educators in two cities in Ontario. The educators had experience teaching students with ASD in a regular classroom. The results showed educators felt strongly about needing educational assistants for integration (Lindsay et al., 2014). Similarly, in a questionnaire-based study completed on 63 educators in Ottawa, results showed that appropriate supports needed to be in place for educators to foster development of students (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013). Also, the Symes and Humprey (2012) study showed students with teaching assistants

worked more independently than those without. However, it is also worth noting that with an assistant in the classroom it could impact the number of social opportunities for the student. There is a strong need for more educational assistants and special education teachers to be placed in classrooms to support the needs of all types of students (People for Education, 2021).

On top of the already thin levels of support in Ontario schools, Ontario is also suffering from an ongoing shortage of staff. Every day, there are shortages in schools, with 42% of secondary and 46% of elementary schools reporting not having educational assistants to cover staff that are off (People for Education, 2024). Sometimes when schools are short of educational assistants, special education teachers are pulled to help support the students. Other times, when support for students cannot be covered, principals have had to ask parents of high needs students to keep them at home. This problem has risen in the past ten years from 48% in 2013 to 63% in 2023 (People for Education, 2024). Although not mentioned in the report, it is hard not to see how this becomes a class equity issue, whereby if a child is sent home, or asked to stay home, a parent or caregiver would have to stay with them forgoing opportunities to work. And in addition to this, it is important to point out that classroom teachers are the key educators for students with special education needs, and so missing days of interaction with the classroom teacher put a student with special education needs at a significant disadvantage. The lack of support to help with exceptional students in classrooms is needed for successful integration, to foster development, and to help keep educators remaining in their profession. The shortage of staff only adds more dimension to the problem of limited support allocations.

Para-Professional Services and Well-being Support

Delays in the accommodation process along with delays in the provision of special education programs and services constitutes a significant challenge and barrier to inclusive

education in Ontario. “The waiting lists for programs and community supports is too long, so students are not receiving services in a timely manner” (People for Education, 2024, p. 5). Funding shortages are leading to long lists of students that are lost to much needed services. Often for an elementary school student to be identified with an exceptionality, testing needs to be completed by a psychologist with a psycho-educational test. In Ontario, only about 26% of elementary schools have access to psychologists (People for Education, 2024). Schools are usually given a small number of assessments that they are allowed to have completed each year, which just leaves waitlists open. The limited amount of testing being completed and the length of time to get an assessment is having an impact on educators and their ability to meet student needs. According to CCPA (2022), there was only one psychologist for every almost 2,600 students and one speech pathologist for about 2,300 students in Ontario.

Student well-being and mental health support is not much better. In a 2022-23 People for Education survey on students’ mental health, data showed that 95% of schools need more support for mental health, while only 9% of schools have regular access to a mental health specialist (People for Education, 2023). With respect to well-being supports, the OSSTF survey participants reported that 66% child and youth workers (CYW), 89% behavioural specialists, and 77% social workers (SW) were only available ‘some of the time’, ‘rarely’, or ‘never’ (OSSTF, 2023). One educator participant from the OSSTF survey stated that, “Classroom teachers [are having] to deal with abuse and mental health issues I have never seen in my years of teaching. With one youth counselor in a school for maybe 800 kids, good luck. We are seeing behaviours I do not know how to describe...I have never seen the aggressiveness towards teachers I am seeing now.” (OSSTF, 2023, p. 3).

Cuts to education in Ontario, especially in special education have a direct link to the ability to put supports in place that would prevent students “with cognitive disabilities, social and emotional issues, or mental illnesses from engaging in violent behaviour” (Del Riccio, 2021, p. 159). Without the proper funding in place, it is difficult to run intervention programs that many of the students in Ontario schools need. Without the intervention programs and funding to special education services, the supports in place are not adequate which leads to students experiencing “frustration, anxiety, and withdrawal, and [they] may become more likely to engage in violence” (Del Riccio, 2021, p. 170). The Ontario Ministry of Education admits that over the past few years they have put more funding into areas such as mental health and special education but admits that “there is more to do to improve the safety of students and staff” (Del Riccio, 2021, p. 164). Well-being and mental health supports are crucial to help both educators and students, as educators do not know how to reach these students on their own which only contributes to the challenge of lack of support in Ontario schools.

Class Size Matters

In Ontario, most students are placed within regular classrooms or in special education classrooms inside regular schools (Parekh & Brown, 2019). Students with exceptionalities are often placed on IEPs to meet their needs. Regular classrooms have students with all different exceptionalities and class sizes vary depending on grade level. For example, kindergarten classrooms with a teacher and an early childhood educator have up to 29 students, with a hard cap at 32, grades one to three have up to 23 students and grades four to eight have up to 24.50 students (Government of Ontario, 2020). However, it is important to note that there are classes where the “number of students exceeds the average” (OCDSB, para. 7, 2020). The averages depend on whether a school board might have lower or higher enrollment numbers between its

different schools allowing for some classrooms to be above the Government of Ontario's set classroom average.

There are benefits to smaller class sizes including the ability for educators to “more effectively address the unique learning needs of special education students while building safe, integrated classroom communities” (Froese-Germain et al., 2012; Bascia, 2010, as cited in OECTA, p. 1, n.d.). The Canadian Teachers' Federation found that out of 10,000 surveyed classes, 28% had at least five students with special education needs, a number that has been doubling over the past ten years (CTF, 2011, as cited in OECTA, n.d., p. 1). Classroom size can certainly play an obstacle in the amount of instruction given to the most vulnerable students. Smaller class sizes can also lead to more time for critical thinking and important discussions for any type of student in the classroom (OECTA, p. 1, n.d.-a).

Overall, the increase in classroom needs has led to different issues, including less support for all students, especially students with exceptionalities, and higher attrition rates among educators (Koenig et al., 2017; People for Education, 2021). One issue caused by increased class sizes is violence. At the high school level, members of OSSTF felt that the larger class sizes were one of the reasons “underpinning and exacerbating the rise of violence in schools” (OSSTF, 2023, p 4). I will develop this issue of violence in schools shortly.

Additionally, another issue with larger class sizes is having less support per student in the classroom. Students with formal identifications are receiving some support through educational assistants and resource teachers but at high ratios (People for Education, 2018). When classroom sizes are larger and there is little to no support in the room, there is less individual attention to students, the classroom can be more difficult to manage, and the classroom instruction may not be as effective.

Behavioural Concerns – Harassment and Violence

Teachers are increasingly facing harassment and violence in the classrooms, a problem many teachers feel is being ignored. “We feel unseen; we feel unheard. We are subject to physical violence and verbal threats on a daily basis. . .we don’t feel safe, we are frustrated” (OSSTF, 2023, p. 7). This is just one example of the impact that one of these challenges is having on educators. Behavioural concerns are another barrier to inclusive education with a big impact on educators. (Del Riccio, 2021; ETFO, 2018; ETFO, 2023; Hutchinson et al., 2015; Lindsay et al., 2014; Montgomery, 2018; OECTA, 2018; OSSTF, 2023; Santor et al., 2019).

In a study on ASD, it was found that managing student behaviour was challenging for educators when fully including students in classrooms because of the educators not understanding how to deal with outbursts, unstructured time, and classroom engagement for the students (Lindsay et al., 2014). This was echoed in a 2015 mixed-methods study completed in Ontario on 208 teacher candidates. The teacher candidate questionnaire looked at perceptions of teaching students with developmental disabilities. Results indicated that teacher candidates had difficulty with students that displayed emotional and behavioural outbursts and did not know how to calm them (Hutchinson et al., 2015). Education students are coming out of faculties not knowing how to support specific types of students in their classrooms, especially students with behaviour. According to the results of the Harassment and Violence against Educators survey completed during the 2017/2018 year on 1,688 educators in Ontario, behaviour concerns are common amongst educators. It indicated educators across Ontario experience difficulties meeting the increasing expectations and struggling students are ‘lashing out’ in violent ways (Santor et al., 2019). Students lashing out is not only dangerous for

educators, but for other students in the classroom as well. Behavioural concerns are both emotional and physical in nature and have increased in the past ten years (Santor et al., 2019)

Harassment

According to the Harassment and Violence survey completed in the 2018-2019 school year, different forms of harassment are taking place in Ontario's classrooms including insults, put-downs, and obscene gestures. Alarming 48.9% of education workers indicated that they experienced harassment that was initiated by students (Santor et al., 2019). 25% of the education workers surveyed admitted that they were victims to students making false accusations and starting rumours, these accusations were verbal, sexual, and aggressive in nature (Santor et al., 2019). Education workers are constantly putting out fires and the “children that need support but are not disruptive are passed over, while those that are disruptive are not having their needs met either – neither group is getting the assistance that would allow them to thrive” (Santor et al., 2019, p. 35).

Violence and harassment experienced by Ontario teachers and other education workers including early childhood educators has particular features including gender and race relations. For example, female educators faced sexual harassment in the form of questions and comments relating to their own sexual activity, while other forms were “racist, homophobic, and Islamophobic tropes” (Del Riccio, 2021, p. 155). There is little doubt that the defunding of public education, along with other social political economic factors, has had a negative impact on workplace safety for educators in Ontario in particular female educators. It may also be important to note that it seems likely and reasonable to suggest that incidences of harassment and violence in Ontario schools is likely underreported.

In 2017, the Ontario English Teachers Association (OECTA) conducted a Workplace Violence and Harassment Against Teachers survey on 3,500 OECTA members. The results indicated that 41% of elementary teachers had personally experienced harassment, while 47% had witnessed harassment (OECTA, 2017). Similarly, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) conducted an All-Member Workplace Survey in 2018 which indicated a rise in violence incidents and that violence was a growing problem, but it did not indicate if the incidents were from harassment or violence (ETFO, 2018). In 2023, ETFO conducted another All-Member Workplace Survey, which has seen an increase in most of areas from the 2018 study (ETFO, 2023a). Although this paper mainly focuses on issues happening in elementary school, it is important to include what is happening in the secondary level as well. The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) completed a school violence survey in the fall of 2023 that was based on experiences taking place during 2022-23 and the beginning of the 2023-24 school year. 6,585 OSSTF members took part in the survey and several key findings came out of the survey (OSSTF, 2023). First and foremost, the survey confirmed that violence in schools is growing, with 75% of members surveyed indicating that there are more violent incidents now, then when they first started, while three out of five members said that the severity has gotten worse (OSSTF, 2023).

Unfortunately, harassment appears to be under reported for different reasons. These reasons range from feeling that the harassment was too minor, that it could be handled by the person experiencing the harassment, not enough time to report the harassment, being embarrassed to tell someone, and lastly, sometimes it is not reported because it is felt that administration is not going to help (Santor et al., 2019).

Violence

Alongside the increase in harassment, is the increasing rates of physical violence.

According to Del Riccio, violence and harassment as experienced by educators is an area that is often overlooked for a variety of reasons. First, violence in schools is mainly reported on in terms of violence against students, violence against educators does not receive a lot of media attention, and lastly the violence happens outside of the public eye (Del Riccio, 2021).

The high rates of school violence and the frequency with which it is happening is creating classrooms that are unsafe. For instance, 70% of Ontario education staff surveyed in the Harassment and Violence survey, had experienced a variation of physical force including but not limited to hitting, biting, or having an object thrown at them (Santor et al., 2019). Given the high rates of violence, both education workers and students are at risk of violent attacks on any given day. The Harassment and Violence survey also highlighted the connection between school violence and providing resources to help students achieve academic and social success. The report notes that there is a “desperate need for adequate resourcing to ensure students are afforded the support they require to meet their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural needs” (Santor et al., p. 35, 2019). As the research is suggesting, training and resources need to be available to both staff and students.

Some of the results from the ETFO and OECTA union surveys were not broken down to indicate whether it represented harassment or violence. For example, the results indicated 89% of educators had experienced or witnessed violence or harassment in schools, with 60% experiencing violence, 37% of educators between 35 and 44 years witnessed violence, while 75% were women, and 61% at the elementary level (OECTA, 2017). Long term impacts were also noted such as psychological stress, property damage, physical harm, difficulty teaching due to constant interruptions, and 26% took time off work (OECTA, 2017). Similarly, 70% of

ETFO members experienced violence or harassment, while 79% felt violence was increasing, 83% felt that violence had a negative impact on their teaching and, 36% had completed classroom evacuations (ETFO, 2018). Data from the 2023 ETFO survey saw an increase in these same areas. For example, ETFO members experiencing violence or harassment was up 7% at 77% and up 4% to 87% was educators that felt violence was having a negative impact on their teaching, while classroom evacuations had decreased by 1% to 35% (ETFO, 2023). The results of the latest ETFO survey also indicated that educators working in special education experienced higher rates of violence at 86% (ETFO, 2023).

With violent incident reporting, data collected found that only 50% of submitted violence reports were followed up on by administrators, while 22% of educators did not report violent incidents to administration, because 77% found administrative actions were not effective (ETFO, 2018). The data collected regarding violence reports was also worse in most cases in the 2023 ETFO survey. Only 36% of reported incidents of violence were being followed up on, and only 8% of the educators found follow-up actions effective (ETFO, 2023).

Behavioural concerns that stem from education workers being harassed and physically hurt through violence in classrooms needs to be addressed. Classrooms should be a safe place for all education workers and students. In addition, education workers cannot meet and support the needs of any student when violence continues to be a significant concern. According to the ETFO 2023 survey results, more than 40% of members have suffered and injury because of workplace violence from physical to psychological injury (ETFO, 2023). Violence in schools is not limited to Ontario, it is increasing across Canada. 40,000 educators completed the Canadian Teacher's Federation (CTF) survey on violence. Results found that the primary forms of violence included verbal aggression, property damage, threats, and physical assault, that

experiences of violence varied by province between 41% and 94%, and violent incidents had increased and were more severe (Mongomery, 2018). The study also found increased levels of violence towards female, special education, and elementary educators, as well as educators in lower socioeconomic and/or metropolitan areas (“Lack of resources,” 2018). The OSSTF survey also saw increased levels within its female education workers. 35% of female educators experienced physical force compared to 20% of males, and 75% of educational assistant were victims of physical force, with 89% being female (OSSTF, 2023). One participant in the OSSTF survey noted that “it is almost exclusively happening to female teachers” (OSSTF, 2023, p. 4).

Most of the union and federation studies were conducted within the past four years indicating the importance and relevancy of violence against educators and the need for it to be addressed immediately. Members of OSSTF that took part in focus groups admitted that they were thinking about leaving the profession as there are so many stressors that they are facing at work (OSSTF, 2023). Violence happening in schools is stopping educators from entering and staying within the education profession, which is yet another impact of these challenges that they are experiencing.

Lack of Training and Resources for Educators

The third barrier and challenge educators face with inclusive education is lack of training and resources available to educators (Brackenreed, 2008; D’Intino & Wang, 2020; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013; Grierson & Woloshyn, 2013; Killoran et al., 2013; McCrimmon, 2015; Webster & Valeo, 2011). Training and resources are necessary for educators during both the pre-service and in-service years. For instance, a questionnaire-based survey completed in north-eastern Ontario on 269 educators, found that educators were not

satisfied with the level of both pre-service and in-service training to meet students' needs nor were they prepared for the different educational challenges in classrooms (Brackenreed, 2008). Training and resources will continue to be scarce as the current Conservative government continues to make cuts to education spending (Del Riccio, 2021). The Ministry of Education recognized that there was some need to protect educators against issues around violence as it committed funding for a half-day of violence prevention training for educators in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years (Del Riccio, 2021). However, a one half day of training, is not enough to prepare educators for the types of violence they are seeing and dealing with on a regular basis.

Pre-Service Educator Training

In Ontario, there are 14 Bachelor of Education elementary education programmes. However, few have courses that are directly tied to inclusive practices. For example, only 7.2% of the faculties of education had courses in differentiated instruction (D'Intino & Wang, 2020). Courses tended to vary from school to school and topics included students with different abilities and learning profiles. Several universities had one or two courses that taught pre-service educators about differentiated instruction or inclusion. Some universities have elective courses that looked deeper into topics such as inclusion, diversity, and differentiation but the courses are not mandatory (D'Intino & Wang, 2020). This type of pre-service training is problematic because most pre-service educators are only getting introductory information on topics such as inclusion, even though it is the model for education across Ontario. It is then left up to pre-service educators to seek out their own professional development after they have graduated from the education program that is supposed to be preparing them for their teaching career. This leads to “pre-service teachers...entering the profession with not much more than

surface-level understanding of inclusive education” (D’Intino & Wang, 2020, p. 676). Pre-service educators themselves have indicated that they need more university instruction surrounding differentiation strategies to be able to improve their instruction inside inclusive classrooms (D’Intino & Wang, 2020). Pre-service teachers were proud of their ability to do differentiated instruction but were challenged by being able to do it effectively.

Lack of educator preparation out of faculties seems to be an issue all over Canada. Professor McCrimmon from the University of Calgary found across Canada education programs did not provide proper training for childhood disabilities and educators were left struggling with inclusion challenges (McCrimmon, 2015). Teacher training programs in Ontario involve a two-year program for accreditation, with a general qualification level in either primary-junior, junior-intermediate, or intermediate-senior. Upon review of the University of Windsor’s Bachelor of Education program, there are no specific courses on special education but a few courses that have general information including Foundations of Practice and Differentiated Instruction (University of Windsor, 2022). Faculties of Education do offer three-part AQ’s in special education but only to those that have already graduated from the Bachelor of Education program.

In-Service Educator Training

Educators need to have proper ongoing training to support the needs in their classrooms. There are different opportunities for educators to have training once they have been hired onto school boards. School boards have training that is often geared towards their individual school or board improvement goals and will offer training based on current initiatives that they are focused on. The ministry also offers the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) to newer educators. This program allows newer educators to be paired with

experienced educators. The goals of the NTIP program are to ensure new educators have orientation to their school and board, are mentored by educators with experience, and are given professional development that is relevant to what is needed (OME, 2021). Mentoring or coaching is another way for educators to receive support as their immediate needs can be identified (Kise, 2006, as cited in Grierson & Woloshyn, 2013, p. 404). Having someone to ask questions to and observe can be beneficial for new educators to be able to apply to situations that they have found themselves in or will find themselves in. Educators can also take part in their own training programs through after school in-service opportunities, courses run by different organizations for educators such as the Geneva Centre and taking additional qualification (AQ) courses.

There are few courses offered for educators that help with supporting students with varying needs. In Ontario, there are three-part AQ courses offered through most faculties of education and the teaching unions specifically for special education (OECTA, n.d.-b; University of Windsor, n.d.). These courses provide an opportunity to investigate different exceptionalities through case studies and projects. However, a study completed by Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) found that the special education AQ courses only gave educators basic understanding of exceptional students (Killoran et al., 2013). For example, twenty-four members of the teaching profession and university faculty were asked to review the special education AQ courses. They found that there was a lack of resources to support educators working with students that had exceptionalities and that knowledge was general, rather than specific (Killoran et al., 2013).

When it comes to courses that are more specific to exceptionalities and managing classrooms, there are single AQ courses to help educators learn more about students with

communication needs, specifically autism spectrum disorder, as well as an AQ in classroom management (OCT, n.d.). The problem with AQ courses is that they can be expensive, especially for educators first starting out and not having permanent employment. Educators also need to have the desire to take the AQ courses as there is no requirement to take them and so knowledge would not be equitable with all educators. Even special education educators are only required to have part one of the three-part special education qualifications.

Supporting educators through different training opportunities helps them to enhance their professional knowledge. Professional knowledge can “foster educational improvement” in educators (Guskey, 2002; Snow et al., 2005; Fullan et al., 2006, as cited in Grierson & Woloshyn, 2013, p. 402). One important idea to note is that when training educators, it is important to make sure that it is not something that is already pre-determined. Educator participants that took part in a professional development study expressed that they needed training and learning that was relevant to them. Some participants shared that they needed learning opportunities that were more “explicit and intensive” (Grierson & Woloshyn, 2013, p. 416). As educators, it is important to differentiate instruction for our students, but the same learning opportunities need to apply to educators that all have unique needs and areas to improve. It is important to allow educators to have training that is relevant and will help them to target their needs as an educator in the classroom.

Differentiated Instruction Resources

There is an increase in the types of learners that are entering classrooms which requires a “need for more inclusive pedagogy” (D’Intino & Wang, 2020, p. 668). Differentiated instruction (DI) can be an effective tool for inclusive pedagogy however it does have challenges that include “high student-teacher ratios...lack of availability of educational

equipment and instruments, classroom layouts not being suitable for differentiated instruction, and the amount of planning time and effort that is required” (D’Intino & Wang, p. 670, 2020). Not all educators have the resources and experience required to implement DI when there are many ranges of students in their classrooms. Ontario recognizes the importance of DI and it is laid out in Ontario’s *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*. Ontario understands that DI is one way to achieve inclusion, but it is unclear who teaches educators how to accomplish this in their classrooms (Ontario, 2009, as cited in D’Intino & Wang, 2020, p. 670). It is important to have resources available for all educators that are struggling to meet the needs of their students. A study completed by Grierson & Woloshyn (2013) on differentiated professional development indicated that their findings found strong support towards individualized coaching for educators. The study also showed the critical importance of allowing educators to grow professionally through differentiated learning opportunities to better inform their practice and to better educate their students. Differentiated learning opportunities for educators can be just as important for their learning as it is for student learning.

Students with Exceptionalities

Classroom teachers understand when a student in their class has needs and they continue to watch students in Ontario get left behind, “this is a significant emotional burden on the province’s educators” (CCPA, 2022, p. 26). An educator’s job is to help their students, and they often keep those feelings within their heart when they are not able to. In Ontario, the special education funding is based on a formula that has no understanding about the needs of the student it is tied to (CCPA, 2022). Funding needs to be tied directly to the needs of the actual student, not based on a formula that is applied to any student under the special education

umbrella. We are taught to understand that all students are different and yet, we apply the same formula to all needs.

In the 2015-16 Ontario school year, approximately 8.8% of the school population was identified with exceptionalities through an IPRC. While at least 17.3% of all students received special education services without being formally identified (LDAO, 2018). A study conducted by the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) indicated, exceptionalities are understood only in a general sense by educators. Exceptionalities are not necessarily understood specific to the distinct types (Killoran et al., 2013).

In Ontario, there are some exceptionalities that are more prevalent than others. Both learning disabilities (LD) and ASD are common exceptionalities in Ontario. According to the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario almost 40% of Ontario students in the 2015-16 school year with formal identifications through the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) had learning disabilities (LDAO, 2018). Since not all parents choose to formally identify their children, this does not account for other students diagnosed with LD. Likewise, 1 in 66 children in Canada between the ages of 5 and 17 have autism, with 135,000 people in Ontario with autism (Autism Ontario, 2020). Of the total people with autism in Ontario, it is unclear how many are school age. Another common condition that many students have is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Although Ontario recognizes ADHD, it does not fall under any of its categories for exceptionalities and is usually only formally identified when paired with another exceptionality (CADDAC, n.d.).

A study completed on twice-exceptional students in Ontario also indicated that there is a lack of awareness surrounding twice-exceptional students among classroom educators and the awareness is just starting to grow (Dare & Nowicki, 2015). Twice-exceptional students are

students that have at least two exceptionalities and multiple labels. Often these types of students are those that are gifted but also present with a learning disability (Dare & Nowicki, 2015). Since there is a lack of awareness surrounding these types of students, it is difficult for educators to properly program for them.

Different studies have shown gaps in the training and knowledge needed to better support educators. For example, the ASD study found educators needed training and support to help with full inclusion but lacked training and resources (Lindsay et al., 2014). In another study on ASD, it was found that educators had trouble reaching students that had social and emotional needs as educators do not know the specific approaches (Symes & Humphrey, 2012). A study that focused on the needs of Deaf and Hard of Hearing students found the same concern. The participants indicated that their teacher education and professional development had not prepared them to work with students with hearing loss in an effective way (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013). Adam McCrimmon, a professor at the University of Calgary, looked at the different provinces and territories in Canada and found that Canadian education programs did not provide proper training for childhood disabilities and educators were left struggling with inclusion challenges (McCrimmon, 2015). Lack of training, resources and knowledge of specific disabilities is limiting educators' abilities to meet the diverse needs in Ontario classrooms.

ELL Students

Another large population of students in Ontario schools that are underserved are the English language learners (ELLs) (People for Education, 2017; Still et al, 2016; Webster & Valeo, 2011). It is up to individual school boards to complete an English language proficiency test on ELL students to decide on the amount and level of support the student will need.

Intensive support may be required to increase the student's ability to acquire the English language. School boards are also required to have protocols in place for students that might need both ELL and special education services. It is important to note that ELL students will be placed with their age-appropriate cohort regardless of how they place on the English language proficiency test (OME, 2007a).

According to People for Education, 63% of Ontario's elementary schools had ELLs, but only 38% of English-language elementary schools had ELL educators in 2017 (People for Education, 2017). The lack of ELL educators means that the ratio of educators to students can be quite high. It was noted that schools with 10 or more ELL students have an average ratio of 76 ELL students for one ELL teacher (People for Education, 2015). On top of the shortage of ELL educators, there are concerns over the level of training that ELL educators are receiving. Research has shown that when it comes to preparing educators, little preparation is given for them to teach multilingual and multicultural classrooms effectively (Stille et al, p. 482, 2016). The lack of training for educators starts when they are teacher candidates, as the literature suggests there is a gap in learning (Stille et al, 2016; Webster & Valeo, 2011). Six graduates from a university in southwestern Ontario took part in a semi-structured questionnaire targeting teacher training and English language learners. The study showed their course work did not provide them with the skills they needed to instruct students whose first language was not English (Webster & Valeo, 2011). Although there are Ministry of Ontario ESL policies and curriculum resources, the capacity level to support these policies and resources varies through the province (Stille et al, p. 483, 2016) Educators need both relevant and useful professional development to properly support our ELL students in Ontario. The ELL study conducted by Stille et., al (2016), indicated that with scaffolded professional learning activities, along with

extra time and resources, there was success but when it became more procedural, there was a disconnect by the educator. This shows the importance of educator autonomy so that they can own what they are doing.

Mental Impact on Educators

Educators in Ontario are suffering from both burnout and compassion fatigue (ETFO, 2018; Koenig et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2005; OECTA, 2017; OSSTF, 2023; Santor et al., 2019). Over the years, the teaching profession has changed and has become more demanding. It is also said to be “one of the most stressful professions” (Johnson et al., 2005, as cited in Koenig et al., p. 259, 2018).

Burnout

A study conducted on 8000 Canadian educators found that 79% had increased levels of stress from the last five years and it had a negative impact on their teaching abilities (Koenig et al., 2018). Some of the stressors included lack of planning time to plan classes, lack of support for their students, the grade they were teaching, lack of time to work on IEPs, lack of resources, constant changes to the curriculum, and the loss of their autonomy within their job (Koenig et al., 2018). Some of these issues and concerns are causing educators to leave the profession due to burnout. It is also noted that 40.7% of the educators studied experienced elevated levels of emotional distress, while 14% of educators are leaving the profession after their first year, and 50% within the first five years (Koenig et al., 2018). Educator wellness needs to be addressed as it has a negative impact on student success and the overall wellbeing of Ontario’s educators. Things need to be put in place so that educators do not get to the point of burning out and leaving the profession.

Although student behaviour was addressed earlier, it along with the stressors mentioned above, has a devastating impact on educators. According to the 2017/2018 Harassment and Violence Against Educators Survey, educators are feeling anxiety, having panic attacks, becoming depressed, feeling hopeless, and have an overall sense of sadness due to student violence that is happening in their classrooms. These emotions are leading them to have negative feelings while at school including the inability to concentrate and the violence is even leaving educators with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Survey results showed that one in six classroom workers were at risk of burnout or met the criteria for burnout (Santor et al., 2019). A violence survey conducted by ETFO shows similar findings, 83% of ETFO members are finding that the violence in the classroom is making it difficult for them to teach (ETFO, 2018). This same message is repeated in a violence survey completed by OECTA, “teachers need more education on how to deal with these students. We are not behavioural psychologists. We don’t have the skills nor the support to deal with these situations” (OECTA, 2017, p. 5). Educators at the high school level feel the same way as their elementary colleagues. The lack and decreasing support in classrooms seems to correlate with attrition rates of educators. For example, the results of a survey on 269 educators in north-eastern Ontario concluded that there was a relationship between teachers leaving the profession and decreases in classroom support (Brackenreed, 2008). Some OSSTF members took part in a focus group to be able to share more open-ended opinions on the state of education. One member shared their conversation with a principal that said, “if the trajectory of public education doesn’t change, teaching will be something people do for ten to fifteen years, burn out and then leave” (OSSTF, 2023, p. 7). That is a powerful concept to consider because our educators are at that point right now.

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion Fatigue (CF) is something that will develop over time and the symptoms can often look like someone that is suffering from PTSD. Compassion fatigue happens when someone is close to someone that has suffered through trauma (Koenig et al., 2018). Educators often bare the weight of the things their students are going through on their own shoulders. A large Canadian survey indicated that “62% of teachers felt stress related to having to deal with student health and personal issues” (Canadian Teachers’ Federation, 2014, as cited in Koenig et al., 2018, p. 262). Sometimes stress is felt through trying to help students and the inability to be able to help.

Research suggests that educator burnout and compassion fatigue hold negative impacts on educators. These impacts can have a trickle-down impact on students both in terms of motivating them and their general attitude towards learning (Koenig et al., 2018). It is important that the wellbeing of educators is recognized and that actions are put in place to best support them. Each year, educators have more work placed on their shoulders, but work is never removed from them. “Teachers are challenged with the task of successfully undertaking many roles and responsibilities in their everyday work” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, as cited in Koenig, 2017, p. 260). The weight of being a parent, nurse, psychologist, social worker, friend, and educator can be too great for many educators to bare. The Koenig et al., (2017) study pointed out that Canadian educators are burning out and leaving the profession, while taking on compassion fatigue because they are experiencing the trauma of their students. Teachers are taking on more than just their role of an educator and this becomes challenging when trying to balance a classroom with a diverse set of needs.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

Summary of the Literature

This literature review provides an overview of existing peer-reviewed studies, private organization studies, and union studies that demonstrate current understandings of the various barriers and challenges that educators face with inclusive education in Ontario. It also helps to provide a detailed review of the impact that the barriers and challenges have on our educators.

Throughout the literature, it is evident that educators are having difficulty meeting the needs of all students in Ontario classrooms. The literature shows that there are specific barriers that prevent this. There is a decrease in the amount of classroom support available with both special education teachers and educational assistants. While class size plays a role in the amount of support available per student. Classrooms have students with severe behavioural needs, needs that are difficult for educators to deal with on their own with a classroom of other students. Educators face harassment and violence in their classrooms each year. The amount of training and resources available seems to be different from board to board and school to school. However, gaps with training are starting at Ontario's faculties of education, where each faculty has only few courses that can help educators with the diverse needs of today's learners. Once they become in-service teachers, most training regarding students with exceptionalities must happen outside of school and at the cost to the educator. Lastly, another barrier that prevents educators from meeting the needs of students today is the mental impact of the job itself. Educators are suffering from burnout because of lack of planning time, resources, supports for students, and autonomy to do their job. Educators are also struggling through compassion fatigue from having to carry the sufferings of their students.

Since most of the research on classroom barriers has been done individually, I would like to contribute to the existing literature by putting all the barriers together to be able to make recommendations to the Ontario Ministry of Education and to individual school boards, to address the growing concern of the barrier's educators are facing when it comes to addressing the diverse needs of all the students in their classrooms. It is important to ask, if Ontario educators are prepared for the diverse classrooms of today?

Limitations within the Current Literature

Many of the studies in this literature review illustrate the barriers that educators are facing teaching in Ontario classrooms (Autism Ontario, 2020; Brackenreed, 2008; CADDAC, n.d.; CCPA, 2022; Dare & Nowicki, 2015; Del Riccio, 2021; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013; ETFO, 2018; ETFO, 2023; Hutchinson et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2005; Killoran et al., 2013; Koenig et al., 2018; LDAO, 2018; Lindsay et al., 2014; McCrimmon, 2015; Montgomery, 2018; OECTA, 2018; OSSTF, 2023; People for Education, 2017; People for Education, 2018; Santor et al., 2019; Still et al, 2016; Symes & Humphrey, 2012; Webster & Valeo, 2011). However, there is no research in Ontario that questions the barriers associated with inclusive education and the classrooms that educators are dealing with today. There are many studies that deal with different pieces of the challenges that are seen in classrooms but none that tie them altogether. When looking at the different studies, limitations can be seen within the topic scopes, the sample sizes used, and geography.

A limitation of the Hutchinson (2015) study was that it only looked at the perceptions of pre-service educators and their experience with teaching students with developmental disabilities. Like the Hutchinson study, the Webster and Valeo (2011) study was also just conducted on pre-service educators but based on their experiences with ELL students. Also, in

the Webster and Valeo (2011) study, participants were not randomly chosen and may not be reflective of the general population of pre-service educators. Both studies cannot be generalized to classroom educators' experiences but can help us to understand where the lack of training is starting. Further research could be done on in-service educators to compare their experiences to pre-service educators. This will enable us to understand where there are gaps for supporting educators with the different needs they are seeing in their classrooms. Similarly, the Eriks-Brophy and Whittingham (2013) study was limited to one geographic area and one type of student, deaf and hard of hearing. Interestingly all these studies highlight the struggles educators have in effectively teaching different types of students. A few limitations in the Brackenreed (2008) research were small sample size and geography but also the reliable response rate for those that had students with special needs was unknown, only 269 out of 4175 educators responded to the questionnaire.

The Santor et al., (2019) study only looked at one issue that is a significant barrier to educators effectively reaching their students, violence. This study focused on violence against educators, but violence against educators is just one side of the issue. It is also important to look at the students in the classrooms that are impacted by the violence that is taking place. It would be worthwhile to see how violence in schools is being perceived by students, especially when it is happening to them or interfering with their learning in the classroom. Violent episodes in the classroom impact both the educator's ability to teach and the student's ability to learn.

In the Lindsay (2014) study on ASD, it was unclear how much experience and knowledge played into the participant answers as the educators surveyed all had additional qualifications in special education. These educators would not apply to most educators in

Ontario and therefore it would be difficult to generalize on the experience and knowledge of educators that did not have additional qualifications in special education or even in other areas such as training specific to autism. Where the Killoran et al., (2013) study on the three-part special education courses was not conducted on anyone currently teaching in classrooms and it is difficult to understand if the results would be similar if completed on classroom educators. A limitation of the Symes and Humphrey (2012) study on the role of teaching assistants was that it was conducted in England. The research in Ontario on teaching (educational) assistants is limited to a few dissertations or it is included in other studies in a general sense. Most of the research completed on educational assistants was built into the other studies.

The ELL study by Stille et., al (2016), was conducted at three different schools, but with different types of language learners. The first was a Kindergarten to grade 8 school in a rural part of Ontario, with a focus on 21 students. Many of the students in this area were German speaking migrants from Mexico. The second was another Kindergarten to grade 8 school in another part of rural Ontario, many of the students spoke Dutch. The last group studied was in an urban school with grades 7 and 8, with a diverse background of languages. Although there were two rural areas to compare, there was no comparison for the urban area study. It was noted that supporting ELL students' needs to be a collaborative process involving professional learning.

The Koenig et al., (2017) study on teacher burnout and compassion fatigue also had limitations, for example the study was completed voluntarily, like the Webster and Valeo study. When studies are completed on a volunteer basis, there could be issues with bias. In the case of the Koenig et al., study, all the participants were from the same school board, their bias could be more reflective of feelings within their board and not necessarily how other educators in

Ontario feel. Also, most of the participants were female, and it would be interesting to see how the results would change if it had, had equal or even more male participants.

Although there is a lot of research on students with diverse needs in classrooms, there are still areas that can be researched. The current literature lacks in understanding the impact on the average student in the classroom. For example, the impact of their academic achievement when teachers have less time to work with them because another student has more needs. Also, the impact behaviour students have on the average student, in terms of their well-being and time taken away when an educator must deal with a behaviour issue. Literature is limited with respect to parental involvement. For example, parents that choose to not identify their child, leads to less support for the child, more demands on the educator and more time taken away from other students. Some parents may not want to identify their child to avoid their child being labelled. There is limited research on teacher training in terms of what training school boards give to educators, as far as, training in working with students with exceptionalities, behavioural students, students with mental health concerns and the average student needs. Another limitation in the current literature is that most studies focus on only one exceptionality. The reality of classrooms in Ontario is that educators are struggling to meet various needs all at once. Classrooms are mixed with several different exceptionalities, students on Individual Education Plans that range from accommodated, modified, and alternative, students with behaviour, and students with mental health struggles. The literature is also limited when looking at the impact these inclusive classrooms are having on the mental health of educators and the possibility of different placements for students when supports are not in place for them.

Limitations can also be found in the various union studies that have been conducted by ETFO, OECTA, and OSSTF. With the ETFO study, only about 25,000 of its 83,000 members responded (ETFO, 2023a). With lower participant rates and surveys completed on a voluntary basis, are members with negative experiences completing the surveys, and would the answers look differently, if there were a higher participation rate? Another limitation of this study was in the way the numbers were reported. For example, it was noted that 77% of its members experienced or witnessed violence (ETFO, 2023a). It would be more meaningful to have that statistic broken down into those that have experienced violence and those that have witnessed violence to understand which is happening more.

Similarly, OECTA completed a violence survey on its members where only 3,500 (2017) out of about 45,000 (n.d.-c) members took part. Like the ETFO rates, the validity of the numbers remains in question, if there would have been a higher participation rate. Unlike ETFO, OECTA did break down the statistics between those that have experienced and those that have witnessed violence with the total being 9 in 10 educators combined, which is higher than the combined amount of ETFO (2017).

The OSSTF study had 6,500 members who participated out of approximately 60,000 members, but invites were only sent out to about 41,000 members (OSSTF, 2023). This study differs as it was not just educators as participants. This makes it difficult to understand the actual rates for violence on just the educators alone. It would have been beneficial to know how many of which type of worker factored into the overall statistics.

Lastly, one limitation from all the surveys involves their concentration on violence alone. Violence is a large issue happening but there are also other challenges educators are facing in education, and it would be beneficial to have those studied as well.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Limitations/Implications

There are limitations with respect to this study and the availability of scholarly research on the topic of challenges that Ontario educators face and the impact that the challenges have on them. There is general research on various topics that include one challenge at a time such as violence against educators, various special education topics, training for educators, and/or mental health of educators. To explain this limitation further, the challenge of violence will be used as an example. There are few Canadian studies completed and even less than that completed in Ontario on violence against educators. Most of the available information on educator violence that is specific on Ontario schools comes from union and organization artifacts. There is no scholarly research in Ontario that pertains to violence that is taking place against other workers in the school setting. There is no scholarly research that includes all the challenges educators are facing at once in Ontario and even in the broader Canadian sense. In fact, as the researcher, I had intended to complete a thesis study on this topic and my study was denied by my school board for reasons that my study would come across as too negative. This potentially is one of the reasons, there is limited scholarly research done on this topic as the story is simply not allowed to be told. At this point, the “truths” will have to be told through analyzing surveys that are completed by private organizations such as People for Education and CTF and through the main educator unions in Ontario like OECTA, ETFO, and OSSTF.

With respect to the current literature that is generally written about challenges in isolation, perhaps it is easier to understand challenges in isolation because when they are grouped together, it paints a negative picture of an education system that needs to change. The

challenges that Ontario educators are facing and the impact that it is having on them, is not limited to just Ontario, it a problem around the world, yet, if we cannot write about it, how can we bring awareness to what is happening in our schools?

The overall implication of this study shows that there is a dire need to revamp an education system that is breaking the educators that work for it. Challenges are difficult to overcome, when there is simply no support in place to help. Furthermore, the implications of these challenges in education that our educators are facing impacts them, students, parents, other support staff in schools, administrators, and those higher up at board offices. There is a financial impact that is tied to the educator challenges, especially when they need time off for mental health reasons or due to being hurt at their job. The Ontario Ministry of Education needs to make some serious considerations to improve the environment of the schools in Ontario. Since only 15% of OECTA educators have faith in the current policy and find it adequate (OECTA, 2017), changes need to happen. Funding needs to be put in place for educators to have more support with violent students, students that are struggling, and for all the other students in their classrooms that have needs. EA support is required in rooms with needs, EAs are only in classrooms about 56% of the time (ETFO, 2017). EA support should extend down into the early years for early detection and intervention of student needs. Funding needs to be put in place to allow for educators and education staff to be properly trained to work with the diverse students we are seeing today. Violence in schools needs to be treated with zero tolerance like it is in other work environments.

Future Research/Recommendations

It is important that scholarly research can be done at the school and/or provincial level to further investigate the challenges that educators are facing, and to properly understand the

significant impact that our education system is having on them. It is also important to have research completed on all the different types of workers that are a part of our schools (educational assistants, custodians, paraprofessionals, yard supervisors, and secretaries) so we can understand how their experiences compare to the experiences of educators. The challenges that educators are facing in schools is just one side of a potentially bigger problem.

It would also be beneficial for the Ontario Ministry of Education to regularly hold different types of focus groups with educators throughout Ontario so that they can have their opinions heard. These focus groups should be on various topics from their experiences in schools, to new policy and curriculum, and the challenges that they face, and the impact it is having on them.

Also, it is essential that funding be made available so that the educators and students of Ontario can be properly supported. Most supports including in-class, board, in-school, and community have been decreased with significance and the only supports that have increased are in the form of student tools such as technology or sensory items (ETFO, 2023b). This is not enough.

Conclusion

The purpose of this major paper was to explore existing research on the challenges that educators are facing within the classrooms in Ontario and the impact that the challenges are having on educators. A comprehensive literature review was conducted, along with an analysis of various artifacts from government, union, and education groups to identify the different barriers and how those barriers are impacting educators and students in Ontario. The research question used to guide this literature review was: What are the barriers and challenges that

educators are facing in the diverse classrooms in Ontario and how are they impacting educators?

Throughout the literature and from the researchers' personal experience in education, it is glaringly evident that educators are faced with many challenges and/or barriers within their classrooms, and they are having a significant impact on educators. Given the limited resources and supports that are available in most of our Ontario schools, educators are having a difficult time meeting the needs of all their students in inclusive education classrooms. The literature has shown that there are several challenges that prevent successful inclusive education. The challenges include classrooms with limited support from educational assistants, resource teachers, paraprofessionals, and access to mental health workers. Class sizes have also been problematic for educators as it is difficult to teach to so many different learning styles and needs. Behavioral concerns are at all time high levels between harassment and violence taking place against educators. Educators find it difficult to help students through unstructured times, to engage them, and to calm them down when they are escalated, especially when they are alone in a classroom with several other students. Educators are lacking in training and resources to help support the diverse students in their classrooms. Educators are not being trained properly in pre-service and in-service education programs to meet the students needs in inclusive education classrooms. The impact that these challenges are having on educators is distressing. Educators are facing mental health concerns, burnout, and they are choosing to leave the profession.

At this point, it is fair to ask our Ontario Ministry Education, based on the current education model in Ontario, are inclusive classrooms still the right place for educators to meet the diverse needs of all students? Are the challenges that our educators are facing, and the

impact that it is having on our educators in Ontario schools important enough to our government to do something about?

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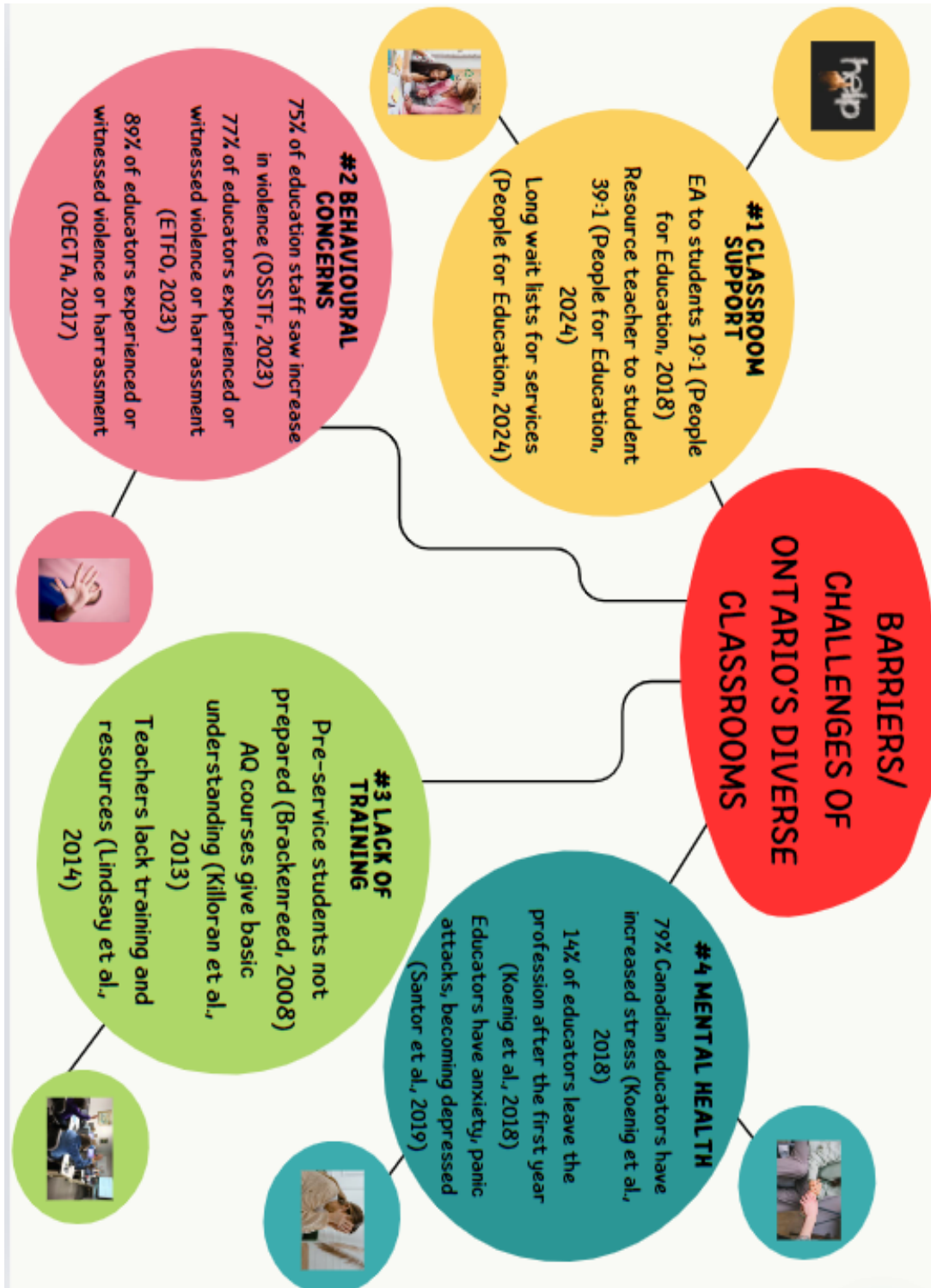
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APPENDICES

Appendix A Visual Representation of Educator Barriers/Challenges



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