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Diagnosed through Bias:

Unpacking the Intersection of Race, Disability, and Inclusion in Special Education in Ontario

A Scoping Literature Review Commissioned
By the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO)

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About this Report

This literature review was commissioned by the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) in 2025 to examine how race, disability, and systemic bias intersect in Ontario's special education system. While the primary audience includes school, system, research, and policy leaders, the findings also inform parents and professional learning for educators across Ontario. A companion guide is available through LD@school to support reflection and classroom application by Ontario educators. Other stakeholders may also find this information helpful, including parents, as they support their child(ren) with navigating the school system. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) or the Ontario Ministry of Education. *Current version released November 1, 2025.*

Executive Summary

This literature review is guided by two central questions. First, how do systemic structures in Canadian and Ontario education shape the experiences of racialized students with learning disabilities (LDs), attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and other neurodivergent exceptionalities? Second, in what ways do race, disability, and neurodivergence intersect to influence access to assessment, identification, and supports in Ontario schools?

Findings from the literature highlight that racialized students are disproportionately identified with behavioural exceptionalities, often leading to more punitive and unsupportive interventions. Studies show that systemic barriers—including limited access to qualified professionals such as psychologists and special education teachers—are more pronounced in schools serving racialized and low-income communities. These structural gaps delay or prevent timely assessment and the implementation of appropriate supports. Furthermore, families of racialized students, particularly Black and newcomer families, report experiences of exclusion and dismissal in interactions with school staff. This contributes to a lack of trust in the system and places the burden of advocacy on those already marginalized. At the same time, school environments play a critical role in shaping how students see themselves. When students are subjected to stigma and deficit-based approaches, their sense of self is negatively impacted; however, when schools adopt

identity-affirming, culturally responsive practices, students report stronger feelings of belonging and confidence in their learning journey.

The implications of this review are far-reaching. In the realm of education, there is an urgent need to invest in professional development that centres anti-racist, trauma-informed, and neurodiversity-affirming pedagogies. Teachers must be supported in implementing inclusive strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction (Eizadirad et al., 2023). At the policy level, reforms must ensure transparency in the development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and the operation of Identification, Placement, and Review Committees (IPRCs), alongside the collection of disaggregated race and disability-based data.

Advocacy efforts must focus on amplifying student and family voices and supporting grassroots community organizations that help families understand and challenge inequities in the system. Finally, meaningful community collaboration is essential. Schools and school boards must actively engage equity-denied groups in co-designing strategies to improve access and accountability in special education.

In conclusion, this report calls for a fundamental shift in how special education is understood and delivered in Ontario. Rather than framing inclusion as an individual or classroom-level concern, the findings underscore the need to address the broader systemic barriers and disadvantages that racialized neurodivergent students face. Lasting change requires data-informed decision-making and an intentional. coordinated effort across policy, practice, and community engagement involving collaboration with educators, administrators, and experts. Furthermore, reforms should be guided by the voice of people with lived experiences with disabilities who have long been pushed to the margins of educational success.

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Introduction

Ontario's public education system is tasked with providing equitable and inclusive education for all students, including those who identify as neurodivergent and come from racialized communities (Bennett et al., 2019; Sider et al., 2024). However, systemic barriers within school-community ecosystems—including policies, funding mechanisms, curriculum, educator practices, and institutional cultures—often produce unequal outcomes (Eizadirad & Trifonas, 2025; James & Turner, 2017; Parekh, 2022). These structures are especially consequential for students at the intersection of race and disability, such as those with learning disabilities (LDs) or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

In response, this report explores the intersection of race, disability, and neurodivergence in Ontario's education system, with a focus on how systemic barriers shape the educational experiences and outcomes of racialized students with learning disabilities, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and related neurodivergent exceptionalities. Grounded in a review of existing literature, the report aims to bridge academic research, policy analysis, and lived realities to better understand and address the complex barriers these students face. It is important to note that this review uses a combination of person-first (e.g., students with learning disabilities, child with autism) and identity-first (e.g., neurodivergent students, autistic child) language, reflecting the evolving discourse and diverse preferences within disability communities — including those in the LD and ADHD communities, as well as the broader disability field.

Two guiding questions frame the scope and purpose of this review. First, ***how do systemic structures in Canadian education shape the experiences of racialized students with LDs, ADHD, and other neurodivergent exceptionalities?*** This question shifts the conversation away from individual deficits and reframes inclusion as a systems-level issue—one shaped by provincial education policies, funding models, curriculum design, educator beliefs, and institutional cultures. It recognizes that racialized students with disabilities are often navigating environments that are not only unprepared to support their learning needs but also shaped by historic and ongoing barriers rooted in systemic racism and ableism (Bennett et al., 2019; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2024).

Second, the report asks: ***in what ways do race, disability, and neurodivergence intersect to influence access to assessment, identification, and supports in Ontario schools?*** This question critically examines the gatekeeping mechanisms within schools—such as the length of time and costs associated with completion of psychoeducational assessments, Individual Education Plan (IEP) development, and access to accommodations—and how they often reflect and reinforce racial and socioeconomic disparities. The analysis highlights the structural factors that limit access to timely and culturally relevant supports for racialized neurodivergent students. The exploration further interrogates how these processes may reproduce exclusion under the guise of support.

For the purposes of this report, the term **inclusion** is conceptualized not as an individual or classroom-based issue, but as a systems-level imperative that must be addressed through coordinated changes in policy, practice, and institutional culture. At its core, inclusion is about student belonging and ensuring that systemic barriers are removed so that every student authentically and fully belongs in their school community. Achieving this vision of inclusion requires a continuum of supports and learning environments that are responsive to the diverse strengths and needs of students, recognizing that equitable access sometimes requires differentiated pathways and placements.

Exceptionalities is a term also used in this report, particularly when reporting data from the Ontario Ministry of Education because it is the term that appears in the Education Act. We also use terms such as disability, special educational needs, and neurodiversity. Each term is limited and has been critically interrogated by diverse scholars. We acknowledge the challenges associated with terminology and the critical discussions and unique discourses related to language. Additional definitions are provided in Appendix A.

Together, these questions aim to identify and name the complex structural and experiential dimensions of exclusion and inclusion in Ontario's education system. By focusing on the overlapping and compounding barriers faced by students at the intersection of race and disability, this report contributes to ongoing efforts to build more equitable, inclusive, and identity-affirming school environments. The findings are intended to inform educators, policymakers, families, and community advocates committed to systemic change to move the discussion to action with respect to opportunities for reform. The long-term goal is for various stakeholders to work effectively together to support all students achieve their full potential.

About Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO)

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The right to learn, the power to achieve

The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) is a registered charity dedicated to improving the lives of children, youth, and adults with learning disabilities. For more than six decades, LDAO has been a trusted leader and advocate for equitable education, evidence-based practice, and meaningful inclusion across Ontario. The organization advances research, strengthens awareness, and provides practical resources that empower individuals with LDs and co-occurring conditions such as ADHD to thrive.

LDAO supports families, educators, and professionals through provincial and local advocacy, signature programs, and accessible, evidence-informed resources. This work helps build accessible learning environments, reduces stigma, and promotes systemic change.

LDAO's mission is to provide leadership in learning disabilities advocacy, research, education, and services to advance the full participation of children, youth, and adults with learning disabilities in today's society. The organization's values emphasize credible advocacy, innovation, informed public policy, and collaboration to drive positive change.

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Special Education in Ontario

Education in Canada is governed at the provincial and territorial level, meaning that each province has its own Ministry of Education that sets curriculum, allocates student and school board funding, and approves policies and practices for implementation within its jurisdiction (Bennett et al., 2019). There is no federal department of education, resulting in variations in educational priorities and service delivery across the country. In Ontario, the Ministry of Education oversees education from kindergarten to grade 12 and allocates funding to 72 district school boards which includes English-Public, French-Public, English-Catholic, and French-Catholic school boards.

Ontario follows a special education model for program and service delivery (Bennett et al., 2019). This is a deficit-based model which sees special educational needs as individual-based requiring remediation. It is important to note that special education and inclusive education are often seen and, in many cases, used as interchangeable terms, yet they are not (Sider & Maich, 2022). Special education is a model that attempts to provide specialized and individualized supports and services to students with disabilities and special educational needs, often in pull-out or segregated settings. Inclusive education aims to remove systemic barriers for all students so that a universal design for learning approach is provided, one that considers the individual strengths and needs of all children and enables the requisite supports to be provided in the regular classroom to the greatest degree possible.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an educational framework that guides the design of learning environments to be inclusive, flexible, and accessible for all students. Rather than retrofitting lessons to accommodate individual needs, UDL proactively plans for learner variability from the outset. UDL emphasizes removing barriers to learning by providing multiple means of engagement (the "why"), representation (the "what"), and action/expression (the "how"). UDL is recognized in Ontario by the Ministry of Education as a best practice for inclusive education, particularly in supporting students with diverse learning needs, including those with LDs, ADHD, and other neurodivergent exceptionalities.

In Ontario, all students receiving special education programs and/or services, whether identified as exceptional or not, should have an individual education plan (IEP). An IEP is a written plan describing the programs, supports, and services required by a particular student, based on a thorough assessment of the student's strengths and needs. There are five categories and twelve definitions of exceptionalities in Ontario (Bennett et al., 2019).

Notes:

1) While the literature describes Ontario's special education model as deficit-based, LDAO advocates for a strength-oriented, evidence-informed continuum of supports that recognizes both individual learning needs and systemic barriers.
2) LDAO recognizes that inclusive education and specialized placements are not mutually exclusive. Inclusive practices should exist within a continuum of placements that respond to diverse learner profiles and needs.

Category	Types of Exceptionalities
Behaviour	Behaviour
Intellectual	giftedness, mild intellectual disability, developmental disability
Communication	autism, deaf and hard-of-hearing, language impairment, speech impairment, learning disability
Physical	autism, deaf and hard-of-hearing, language impairment, speech impairment, learning disability
Multiple	multiple exceptionalities

School principals are required to ensure that an IEP is developed for every student who has been identified as exceptional by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC), within 30 school days of the student's placement in a special education program. Overall, these five broad categories of exceptionalities are designed to address the range of conditions that may affect a student's ability to learn. It does not exclude any medical condition, whether diagnosed or not, that can lead to particular types of learning difficulties. More information on special education in Ontario is available in Appendix A and through the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2017) document entitled "Special Education in Ontario: Kindergarten to Grade 12 Policy and Resource Guide".

All students in Ontario with demonstrable learning-based needs are entitled to appropriate support in the form of special education programs and services, including classroom-based accommodations. Among these, learning disabilities and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder are two of the most commonly identified areas of need. There is a broad recognition of the needs and strengths of students with LDs and/or ADHD; however, school boards in Ontario have a wide spectrum of practices in how they support students with LDs and ADHD. As well, systemic inequities—particularly for racialized students—persist in terms of access to identification and quality of support received (James & Turner, 2017; People for Education, 2024; Sider & Maich, 2022).

As of the 2021–2022 academic year, 17.4% of students in Ontario's publicly funded schools were receiving special education programs and/or services. In total there were 352,672 students receiving special education programs and/or services out of the total of 2,028,731 junior kindergarten to grade 12 students. Approximately 46% of students with special education needs had been identified as exceptional by the IPRC process. In addition, school boards reported that approximately 87% were in regular classrooms for more than half the instructional day (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2025).

The **Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC)** is a formal process used in Ontario's publicly funded schools to determine whether a student should be identified as having an **exceptionality**—such as a learning disability (LD), intellectual disability, or behavioural exceptionality—and to decide the most appropriate placement for the student's learning needs. Established under Ontario Regulation 181/98 of the *Education Act*, the IPRC process ensures that students who need special education programs and services are formally identified and placed in suitable learning environments. The committee typically includes school board staff such as a principal, a teacher (often with special education experience), and other professionals (e.g., psychologists or speech-language pathologists), as well as the student's parent(s)/guardian(s), who have a legal right to attend and participate.

Overview of students receiving special education programs and/or services 2021–22

Students formally identified as "exceptional" by an IPRC

Panel	Number of students	Percentage of panel %	Percentage of all students %
Elementary	82,796	5.9	4.1
Secondary	80,913	12.7	4.0
Total	**163,709**	**N/A**	**8.1**

Students NOT formally identified as "exceptional" by an IPRC

Panel	Number of students	Percentage of panel %	Percentage of all students %
Elementary	120,147	8.6	5.9
Secondary	68,816	10.8	3.4
Total	**188,963**	**N/A**	**9.3**

Source: 2023–24 Education funding: A guide to the Special Education Grant

Relevant School Policies: Understanding Tier System Levels of Support

Ontario's approach to special education is guided by key legislation and policies issued by the Ministry of Education, notably *The Education Act* and *Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) 8*, which mandate that all students with exceptionalities must be provided with appropriate programs and services. A tiered approach to special education intervention is a common approach within school boards comprising three levels of support: Tier 1 which includes universal, classroom-based strategies; Tier 2 which includes targeted small-group interventions; and Tier 3 which is intensive individualized support. While this model is intended to offer equitable and early intervention, research suggests that racialized students often experience delays in progressing through these tiers due to biases in referral, gatekeeping practices, and a lack of culturally responsive assessments (Parada et al., 2023; Parekh & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2017). The Ministry of Education *Growing Success* (2010) document outlines how assessment and evaluation practices must be equitable and responsive to students' needs, while the Ministry's *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009) emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and the removal of systemic barriers. Despite these frameworks, racialized students with LDs and/or ADHD often experience delays in identification, limited access to robust supports, and disproportionate discipline—issues that highlight the need for a more equity-focused implementation of existing policies supplemented with data-informed decision-making (Parada et al., 2023; Parekh & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2017; Parents of Black Children, 2022; People for Education., 2024; Sider et al., 2024).

Funding Models to Support Student Needs

Ontario's education funding is now based on the Core Education Funding (CEF) model, introduced in 2024–25 to replace the previous Grants for Student Needs (GSN). The CEF allocates resources based on enrolment, special education needs, and local demographics, as outlined in the Education Funding Technical Guide 2024–25 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2024). At the same time, People for Education (2024) has called on the province to convene an education task force to help design funding models that more effectively and equitably support students with special education needs. The lack of disaggregated data by race and disability further complicates efforts to ensure equitable funding and policy interventions, with considerations for schools that may lack resources and infrastructure compared to schools in higher socioeconomic communities (Parekh, 2022; Sider et al., 2024). The *Education Act* and various Policy/Program Memoranda (PPMs), including PPM 8- Identification, Placement, and Review Committee and PPM 119- Equity and Inclusive Education, provide frameworks for supporting students with exceptionalities. However, these policies often lack enforcement mechanisms and fail to directly address the compounded marginalization experienced by racialized neurodivergent students (Dei & McDermott, 2019; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2024). While the *Growing Success* document emphasizes differentiated assessment and evaluation practices, implementation is inconsistent and often fails to meet the needs of students with intersecting identities.

Right to Read Report

A final area of consideration for understanding the Ontario special education context is the Ontario Human Rights Commission's (OHRC) *Right to Read* inquiry report (2022a). In October 2019, the OHRC launched a public inquiry into human rights issues facing students with reading disabilities in Ontario's public education system. After significant consultation and research with various stakeholders, the OHRC inquiry released the *Right to Read* report which highlighted that learning to read is a fundamental human right. The report concluded that Ontario's public education system was failing students, particularly those with reading disabilities, by not using evidence-based approaches to teach reading. The report outlined 157 recommendations for the Ontario Ministry of Education, school boards, and faculties of education to address systemic issues related to early reading instruction. Amongst these recommendations and specific to Black and other marginalized students, the OHRC report noted that the criteria and requirements for professional assessments should account for the risk of bias for students who are culturally or linguistically diverse, racialized, identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit, or come from less economically privileged backgrounds (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022b, p. 12). The report made multiple recommendations addressing systemic barriers, including recommendation 148, which highlights the importance of disaggregated identity-based data collection to capture intersectional aspects of disability with race (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022a).

Methodology

A scoping review was completed in July 2025 examining the literature that was available on the topic from 2010 to 2025 as part of discussion around two key questions identified by the LDAO. The inclusionary and exclusionary criteria, databases, and search terms are available and outlined in Appendix B.

Findings from the Literature Review

Guiding Question #1: How do systemic structures in Canadian education shape the experiences of racialized students with LDs, ADHD, and other neurodivergent exceptionalities?

The Ontario curriculum is mandated to be inclusive and reflective of the province's diverse student population. However, studies have shown that curriculum content often marginalize racialized histories and lived experiences (Abawi et al., 2025; Gill, 2012; James & Turner, 2017; Sider et al., 2024). This omission contributes to a school climate in which racialized neurodivergent students struggle to see themselves reflected and valued, impacting both academic engagement and mental health. Pedagogical practices also play a critical role in shaping student experiences. Parekh (2023) argues that dominant deficit-based approaches to neurodivergence and disability pathologize students rather than recognize the systemic barriers that impede their learning. Educator beliefs and biases can lead to the over-identification or under-identification of racialized students for special education services, depending on the context and the student's racial and linguistic background (Kumashiro, 2000; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2024; Parada et al., 2023).

Institutional Culture: Educator Beliefs and Biases

Institutional culture—the norms, expectations, and values within a school—significantly influences how inclusion is enacted, which differs significantly across urban and rural schools. Research indicates that many Ontario schools operate with implicit cultural norms that align with able-bodiedness and neurotypicality (Abawi et al., 2025; Eizadirad, 2019; Kumashiro, 2000; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2024; Sider et al., 2024). These norms often manifest in disciplinary practices that disproportionately affect Black and Indigenous students, many of whom have undiagnosed or unsupported neurodivergent profiles (Dei & McDermott, 2019; James & Turner, 2017; Maynard, 2017; Parada et al., 2023). Educators play a key role in identifying students for assessment and referring them to get a psychoeducational assessment completed to receive special education services. However, research suggests that implicit biases and a lack of intersectional training influence how teachers interpret student behaviour and learning challenges (Too, 2018; White, 2020). Pandey et al. (2025) emphasizes that educators often rely on subjective judgments, which can be shaped by stereotypes and deficit views of racialized students (e.g. perceived as aggressive or resistant). Professional development in Ontario has increasingly included equity and inclusion training, yet significant gaps remain in preparing educators to recognize neurodivergence within racialized populations. Educator training in special education and anti-racism remains unevenly implemented across school boards. Sider et al. (2021) emphasizes the need for leadership development and professional learning opportunities that address intersectionality and supportive inclusive school cultures. Without intentional professional development, educators may default to exclusionary practices, whether through curriculum content choices, assessment strategies, or behavioural interventions. Without robust training in anti-racist and neurodiversity-affirming practices, educators may inadvertently act as gatekeepers who delay or misdirect students' access to necessary supports (White, 2020).

Gatekeeping and Access to Supports

One of the most pressing issues faced by racialized students with LDs or ADHD is inequitable access to assessment and identification (Parents of Black Children, 2022). Psychoeducational assessments are often required to access an IEP and formal accommodations, yet waitlists are long, assessments are costly if pursued privately, and the process influenced by parental advocacy (People for Education, 2024). Families from racialized communities may lack the institutional knowledge, financial resources, or language proficiency to navigate the complexities of educational policies (Eizadirad et al., 2022; Parada et al., 2023; Parekh & Brown, 2019). Additionally, racialized students are often subject to behavioural framing rather than learning-based interventions, particularly Black boys, who are more likely to be disciplined than supported when exhibiting neurodivergent traits (Gill, 2012; Maynard, 2022; Parada et al., 2023; White, 2020). As White (2020) emphasizes in an article titled "*Stop Streaming Black Kids into Special Education",* "racialized students are sometimes shuffled into special education by practitioners who don't understand the urgency to respond to diversity or might lack the confidence to do so in a meaningful way" (para. 7). This trend reflects deep-seated biases in how race and disability are interpreted within school environments and underscores the need for more equitable and culturally informed assessment practices (Justice for Children and Youth, 2021; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2024).

Overall, the experiences of racialized students with LDs, ADHD, and related neurodivergent profiles in Ontario schools are shaped by deeply entrenched systemic structures rooted in deficit stereotypical ideologies. Policies, funding models, curriculum, educator beliefs, and institutional cultures collectively reproduce inequities that disproportionately affect students at the intersection of race and disability. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive and intersectional approach to reform that spans education, policy, advocacy, and community collaboration. By reframing inclusion as a systemic issue, Ontario's education system can begin to move toward more equitable and identity-affirming learning environments for all students.

Note: Addressing educator bias and gatekeeping requires not only awareness and training, but also systemic investments in time, collaboration, and multi-disciplinary supports to ensure equitable identification and access for all students.

Impact on Student Identity and School Belonging

The intersection of race, disability, and neurodivergence affects more than access to services—it also shapes how students view themselves and their place in the school-community ecosystem (James, 2012). Research by James and Turner (2017) shows that Black students in the Greater Toronto Area often feel alienated by school environments that fail to reflect their identities or recognize their strengths. This alienation is compounded for students who are also neurodivergent and navigating an education system that often frames them through a lens of deficiency. Students who are misidentified or receive inadequate supports may internalize stigma related to race and disability contributing to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Conversely, when students receive timely, accurate, and culturally responsive identification and support, they are more likely to experience school as a site of affirmation rather than marginalization (Parekh, 2023). Overall, systemic barriers, educator biases, funding inequities, and gatekeeping practices work together to exclude many racialized students from receiving timely and effective interventions. Addressing these issues requires a deep reimagining of how the education system conceptualizes inclusion, moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach that is often individual-based to a systemic model that recognizes and responds to the complexities of intersecting identities in a culturally nuanced way.

Guiding Question #2: In what ways do race, disability, and neurodivergence intersect to influence access to assessment, identification, and supports in Ontario schools?

The intersection of race, disability, and neurodivergence present significant equity challenges in Ontario's education system, particularly regarding access to assessment, identification, and educational supports. While Ontario's education policies strive to provide inclusive education through mechanisms such as IEPs, psychoeducational assessments, and tiered intervention strategies, these systems often overlook the compounded marginalization faced by racialized students with LDs, ADHD, and related neurodivergent exceptionalities.

Cultural Bias in Assessment Tools and Processes

Assessment tools commonly used in Ontario's education system often reflect Eurocentric norms (e.g., IQ testing) and lack cultural responsiveness or adaptations (Battiste, 2013; Eizadirad, 2019; White, 2020). This creates further disparities in identifying neurodivergent profiles among students from diverse racial and linguistic backgrounds (Dei & McDermott, 2019). Cultural biases in test design and administration can lead to inaccurate results, over-identification in some areas (e.g., behavioural exceptionalities) and under-identification in others (e.g., LDs or ADHD), which contribute to larger issues such as the school to prison pipeline where Black and Indigenous students are disproportionately impacted and become justice-involved (Black Legal Action Centre, 2022; Brown et al., 2021). Parekh and Underwood (2015) note that existing assessments are not always validated for use with multilingual learners or students from non-Western cultural backgrounds. As a result, racialized students—particularly those who speak English as an additional language—are often misidentified or excluded from supports due to test results that do not reflect their actual learning profiles (Kim, 2023). This points to the urgent need for culturally responsive assessment practices that consider the socio-linguistic realities of Ontario's diverse student population led by practitioners with relevant lived experiences (Battiste, 2013; Kim, 2023).

Overall, access to psychoeducational assessments is a crucial gateway to receiving formal accommodations and supports. These assessments, often necessary for official identification of exceptionalities and IEP development, are subject to long wait times in the public school system and are cost-prohibitive in the private sector (People for Education, 2024). Students whose families cannot afford private assessments or do not have the same extent of cultural capital to navigate bureaucratic systems are often left unsupported without access to timely supports (Parada et al., 2023; Parents of Black Children, 2022; Yosso, 2006).

Disproportionality in IEP Identification and Categorization

Racialized students continue to face inequities in how their needs are categorized and addressed. Research by Parekh (2023), James and Turner (2017), Brown et al. (2021), and George et al. (2020) indicate that racialized students are less likely to be formally assessed and, when assessed, more likely to receive behavioural rather than learning-based designations. For example, Black students are overrepresented in behavioural exceptionality categories and underrepresented in learning disability categories. Parents of Black Children (2022) which is a grassroots advocacy organization emphasizes that many Black families are

not adequately informed about their rights or the processes involved in special education. In response, they have created a resource guide for Black families titled *"Navigating the Education System: A Guide for Black Parents and Caregivers in Ontario".* As an advocacy organization they outline how school staff may delay or discourage assessments for Black students, especially boys, by attributing challenges to behaviour rather than learning needs. This practice not only delays necessary interventions but reinforces anti-Black racism by pathologizing student behaviour instead of recognizing neurodivergence (James & Turner, 2017; Maynard, 2022; White, 2020). This disproportionality has serious consequences for the types of supports and placements students receive (Too, 2018). Behavioural designations are more likely to result in segregated special education placements and exclusionary discipline practices, whereas learning-based identifications typically involve inclusive, in-class supports. Thus, misidentification directly impacts a student's educational trajectory and overall school experience (Black Legal Action Centre, 2022; Brown et al., 2021).

Parental Advocacy and Navigational Capital

Families play a crucial role in initiating assessment and identification processes, yet not all parents are equally equipped to advocate for their children within Ontario's education system, particularly newcomers and parents who struggle with expressing their needs in the official dominant language of English or French. Racialized families, especially newcomers or those from lower-income backgrounds, may further lack the navigational cultural capital required to successfully advocate for psychoeducational assessments and IEPs (Gill, 2012; James & Turner, 2017; Parada et al., 2023; Yosso, 2006). People for Education (2024) has documented disparities in parental engagement, often stemming from mistrust, language barriers, or negative prior experiences with schools. These factors can prevent families from initiating or following up on special education referrals. Conversely, white, middle-class families often have more familiarity with school processes, greater confidence in interacting with educators and advocating within the Ontario context, and more financial resources to obtain private assessments when needed (Parekh, 2023).

Between Stigma and Support: How Schools Shape the Identities of Racialized Neurodivergent Students

The identity development of racialized students with LDs, ADHD, and other neurodivergent profiles is deeply influenced by how Ontario's school systems label, respond to, and support their differences. These students often navigate intersecting and overlapping stigmas related to race and disability, shaped by systemic structures that rely on deficit-oriented understandings of behaviour and learning (James, 2012; Too, 2018)). As noted, research shows that Black and other racialized students in Ontario are disproportionately identified under behavioural exceptionalities and underrepresented in categories like learning disabilities, which can lead to more punitive responses rather than inclusive academic supports. Such misidentifications can damage student self-concept and perpetuate narratives of failure and deviance. According to the 2024 People for Education report, while 96% of Ontario principals report having students receiving special education services, only 61% of schools have access to a full-time special education teacher, raising concerns about inconsistent supports. Furthermore, only 53% of schools have access to a psychologist, with rural and lower-income schools reporting the lowest access. These systemic gaps compound the challenges faced by racialized neurodivergent students, many of whom are left unsupported or misidentified, reinforcing marginalization in formal identification processes and daily classroom experiences.

Families of racialized students often encounter similar barriers shaped by racism, ableism, and systemic gatekeeping (Brown et al., 2021; Parada et al., 2023). The *2024 People for Education* report found that only 40% of schools regularly engage families in decisions around special education, and that just 16% offer translation or interpretation support for multilingual families, disproportionately affecting newcomer and racialized communities. These gaps hinder families' ability to advocate for their children's needs and contribute to the broader systemic inequities shaping student identity and engagement in schools. However, when schools engage in culturally responsive and strengths-based approaches, centered on affirming students' racial and neurodivergent identities, students report greater connection to learning and a stronger sense of belonging (Dei & McDermott, 2019). Ultimately, how schools choose to see and support racialized neurodivergent students can either affirm or erase their complex identities.

Recommendations: Towards Data-Informed, Equity-Oriented Reforms

Improving access to assessments and supports for racialized neurodivergent students requires systemic reform. Key policy recommendations include:

- Reinforcing disaggregated data collection on race and disability to monitor patterns of inequity across school boards and geographical locations (e.g. urban and rural)
- Investing in culturally responsive and multilingual assessment tools
- Expanding universal screening models to reduce reliance on parental advocacy
- Providing sustained, identity-informed training for educators, pre-service teachers, and school psychologists
- Strengthening partnerships with community organizations, including grassroots organizations, such as Parents of Black Children, to ensure accountability and culturally grounded practices
- Prioritizing transparent and consistent school board census data to better understand and track the experiences of Black and other racialized students across urban and rural settings.

These recommendations are grouped together and discussed below in more detail.

Policy (IEP Access, Data Disaggregation, and Funding Priorities):

Parekh and Underwood (2015) emphasize the importance of data disaggregation and intersectional analysis in identifying and dismantling systemic barriers. Without robust data, it is difficult to monitor (in)equity in special education or hold systems accountable for disparities in access and outcomes. Ontario Ministry of Education policies should mandate and reinforce the collection of disaggregated data by race, disability, location, and other identity markers to track disparities and inform targeted interventions. Building on existing board-level census work, the Ministry can play a leadership role in establishing consistent provincial standards for data collection and reporting.

IEP access should be streamlined through equitable and culturally responsive pathways that do not depend disproportionately on parental advocacy or private assessments. Although school boards in Ontario collect census-based data, very few school boards make this data transparent and accessible (George et al., 2020; Sider et al., 2024). Much of the published research on racialized students and special education in Ontario has been completed in two of the largest school systems: Toronto and Peel District School Boards. In one such study, Parekh and Brown (2019) noted that findings "...closely mirrors the findings of many international studies that find students enrolled in special education programs are more likely to be racialized, poor, and have limited access to resources" (p. 127). Thus, although there appears to be evidence pointing to the over-representation of Black and other racialized students in special education settings, this is largely based on data from these two school boards. There is a significant need to consider whether these findings are accurate for other school boards, including rural, small, and northern school boards which have unique student populations and needs.

Education (Inclusive Pedagogies, Assessment, and Teacher Training):

Inclusive pedagogies must extend beyond individual-level differentiation to systemic transformation that embeds equity and accessibility across all levels of practice. Culturally responsive and trauma-informed teaching approaches should be embedded across all tiers of intervention. Educators require training that integrates anti-racist, anti-ableist, and neurodiversity-affirming frameworks such as UDL. These approaches align with the Ministry's ongoing focus on evidence-based literacy and mathematics instruction, extending that same rigour to inclusive practice.

Pre-service and in-service professional learning should equip educators with tools to recognize and respond to intersectional needs evidence-informed and identity-aware practices rather than defaulting to punitive or exclusionary measures. Assessment practices must be reframed to account for systemic inequities rather than solely focusing on perceived student deficits. As Too (2018) notes, "Culturally responsive special education training may be a crucial step towards combatting the imbalance composition of special education placements in Ontario" (p. 15). This includes revisiting how psychoeducational assessments are prioritized, funded, and interpreted, ensuring they do not replicate existing biases.

Advocacy (Community Empowerment, Representation, and Systemic Reform):

Community organizations are essential partners in holistically supporting students and their families and as part of shaping education policy and practice. Efforts to increase representation of racialized and neurodivergent voices in school leadership and decision-making roles are essential. Systemic progress depends on valuing lived experience and community knowledge as integral to educational decision-making.

Sustainable inclusion necessitates ongoing partnerships between schools and equity-denied groups, including students and parents. This should involve formal consultations and co-designed programming in schools and community settings offered by non-profits, culturally grounded mental health supports, and collaborative monitoring of equity initiatives and their impact through key performance indicators. Community-based organizations such as Parents of Black Children have played a critical role in advocating for system-level change in Ontario education. Their education guide provides a comprehensive overview of how racialized families can navigate the education system, advocate for IEPs, and challenge exclusionary practices. Such resources are vital in supporting racialized families, but they also underscore the extent to which families must compensate for systemic gaps while reinforcing the need for sustained collaboration between community organizations, school boards, and the Ministry to address systemic barriers collectively.

Key Resources for Families, Educators, and Advocates

Understanding and advocating for support in Ontario's special education system can be overwhelming, especially for racialized families, students with exceptionalities, and those unfamiliar with how the education system and its policies are implemented. Fortunately, there are several accessible, evidence-informed resources that offer guidance, tools, and critical insight into navigating school policies, legal rights, accommodations, and systemic inequities. Whether you're a caregiver seeking support for your child, an educator trying to build inclusive classrooms, or a community advocate working toward equity in education, the following resources offer essential support to help you make informed decisions and push for systemic change.

Parents of Black Children – Education System Guide

This practical guide, developed by Parents of Black Children, is specifically designed to support Black families in understanding and navigating Ontario's education system. It explains key structures like report cards, special education supports, and the role of school staff while also providing culturally relevant advocacy strategies. It highlights systemic anti-Black racism in schools and equips parents with the tools to advocate confidently and effectively for their children's rights. The guide is especially useful for caregivers who want a clear, step-by-step explanation of how to engage with schools, request supports, and access equitable learning opportunities for Black students.

Justice for Children and Youth (2021) – Special Education in Ontario: A Guide for Students and Caregivers

Produced by a legal advocacy organization, this guide provides students and families with essential information about their rights under Ontario's Education Act and Human Rights Code. It breaks down legal terminology and explains how to request an IEP, what to expect in IPRC meetings, and how to appeal decisions. This resource is ideal for anyone looking to understand their legal entitlements and how to hold school boards accountable. It is written in clear, youth- and family-friendly language, making it especially helpful for first-time advocates.

LD@school / TA@l'école – Resources for Ontario Educators

LD@school and TA@l'école are bilingual platforms developed by the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) to support inclusive education for students with learning disabilities. LD@school provides English-language resources, while TA@l'école offers parallel tools in French. Both sites feature evidence-informed strategies, videos, articles, and professional learning modules aligned with Ontario's curriculum and special education policies. Topics include Individual Education Plan (IEP) development, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, mental health supports, anti-racism strategies, and identity-affirming practices — all aimed at helping educators strengthen classroom inclusion and student success.

LDAO Open Letter to SEACs Across Ontario (March 2025)

This document highlights pressing implementation issues in special education, including the need for tiered supports, structured transitions, and a continuum of placements.

LDAO Submission to the Auditor General (August 2025)

This advocacy letter outlines systemic barriers faced by students with LDs and ADHD and provides targeted recommendations related to assessment, placement, educator capacity, and inclusion policy.

People for Education – Special Education Reports

People for Education publishes annual reports based on province-wide school surveys that reveal critical trends and inequities in special education across Ontario. Their 2024 report highlights disparities in access to psychologists, educational assistants, and special education teachers especially in rural and low-income schools. These reports offer insights for policymakers, advocates, and educators seeking data to support calls for funding reform and more inclusive policies. They also help families understand where systemic challenges exist and how their school experience may reflect broader provincial trends.

Parekh, G. (2022) – Equity and Human Rights in Special Education: Critical Reflective Practice Guide & Interactive website

This guide, developed by Dr. Gillian Parekh who holds a Canada Research Chair position with a focus on Disability Studies in Education, provides educators and school leaders with tools to reflect how ableism and racism intersect in special education. It prompts users to examine their own biases, question how placement and identification decisions are made, and move toward more equitable, human rights-based practices. With reflection prompts, activities, and frameworks, presented as a report and through interactive maps, it provides a transformative resource for shifting school culture and practice from compliance-based to equity-oriented. It is ideal for professional learning communities and school administrators committed to systemic change.

Conclusion

The findings from this literature review make clear that racialized students with LDs, ADHD, and other neurodivergent exceptionalities face layered and compounding barriers within Ontario's education system. These barriers are not simply the result of individual biases or isolated practices but also embedded in systemic structures such as policy implementation, funding disparities, rigid curriculum expectations, and culturally unresponsive pedagogies which collectively marginalize students at the intersection of race and disability. From the inequitable processes surrounding assessment and identification, to the misclassification of racialized students under behavioural categories, the system often fails to recognize and affirm the full complexity of students' identities and their needs relative to their culture and lived experiences. These systemic gaps are further exacerbated by inconsistent access to special education staff and supports, particularly in schools serving low-income or racialized communities.

When schools engage in culturally responsive pedagogies, build meaningful relationships with families, and move from a deficit-based to a strengths-based model of support, they create conditions for belonging, success, and self-worth. This underscores the urgent need for equity-driven policy reform, comprehensive preservice and in-service teacher training, and stronger partnerships with communities and grassroots organizations who have long been advocating for data-informed accountability. Moving forward, educational change must be systemic, intentional, and rooted in data-driven decision-making reflecting the voices, needs, and realities of those most impacted. Equity is not just a principle. It must be a practice infused in every layer of Ontario's education system to meet the unique needs of all students and their families, particularly those with disabilities and living in low-income communities where they often experience staff and resource shortages.

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Appendix A: Special Education Key Terms and Definitions

Term	Definitions
Special Education	Programs and services designed to meet the needs of students who have exceptionalities. In Ontario, special education aims to support these students in achieving success in school.
Exceptionality	A term used to describe a student's learning needs that differ significantly from the norm. Categories include Behaviour, Communication, Intellectual, Physical, and Multiple exceptionalities.
Individual Education Plan (IEP)	A written plan developed for a student who has been identified as requiring special education supports. It outlines specific accommodations, modifications, and/or alternative expectations, as well as goals and strategies to support the student.
Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC)	A formal process used in Ontario schools to identify whether a student has an exceptionality and to determine the most appropriate placement for instruction (e.g., regular class with support or special education class).
Accommodations	Supports or services that enable a student with special needs to access the curriculum and demonstrate their learning. Accommodations do not alter the learning expectations. Examples include extra time on tests, assistive technology, or preferential seating.
Modifications	Changes made to the grade-level curriculum expectations to meet the needs of a student. Modifications alter what the student is expected to learn (e.g., a student in Grade 6 working on Grade 3 math).
Alternative Expectations	Learning goals that are not part of the Ontario curriculum, developed for students whose learning needs cannot be met through modified or accommodated expectations (e.g., life skills, social skills, or personal care).

Term	Definitions
Tiered Intervention	A three-level model of support that involves: Tier 1- Universal strategies used for all students. Tier 2- Targeted small group interventions. Tier 3- Intensive, individualized supports
Assistive Technology (AT)	Tools and devices that help students with special needs to learn and communicate. Examples include text-to-speech software, speech-to-text programs, or visual schedule apps.
Resource Teacher or Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT)	A teacher who supports classroom teachers and works directly with students with IEPs. They help design and monitor special education programming.
Inclusive Education	An approach that ensures all students, regardless of ability or identity, learn together in the same classroom and are provided the support they need to succeed.
Learning Disability (LD)	A neurological condition that affects how a person takes in, remembers, understands, or expresses information. Students with LDs may struggle with reading, writing, or math, despite having average or above-average intelligence.
Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	A neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development.
Psychoeducational Assessment	A comprehensive evaluation conducted by a psychologist to identify a student's strengths, challenges, and potential learning disabilities. These assessments inform IEPs and eligibility for special education supports.
Ontario Human Rights Code	A law that protects students from discrimination based on disability, race, or other grounds. Schools have a duty to accommodate students with disabilities.
Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM)	Official directives issued by the Ontario Ministry of Education that provide guidance on specific education policies.

Appendix B: Methodology

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Identifying Relevant Literature

Criterion	Inclusionary	Exclusionary
Literature Focus	Literature that focuses on the prevalence of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education programs in Ontario contexts.	Literature that focuses only on one of the aspects and not the intersection between culturally and linguistically diverse students and special education.
Type of Article/Publication	Academic literature, including scoping reviews, provincial reports, technical and assessment reports, books, case studies, dissertations, multi-jurisdictional research and systematic reviews	Opinion pieces, forums, commentaries, and editorials.
Language	Studies that are published in English.	Studies that are published in French or other languages.
Time Period	Studies that are published from 2010 up until July 2025.	Studies that are published prior to 2010.
Setting	Research data collected in publicly funded elementary and secondary schools in Ontario.	Research data collected in non-publicly funded elementary and secondary schools in Canada (example: homeschool or private schools).
Research scope	Research conducted in Ontario.	Research conducted in non-Ontario contexts.

Databases

Omni (Ontario University Libraries)	JSTOR
Google Scholar	ProQuest
Sage Journals (special education subject area)	Scholars Portal

Search Terms (first row: initial key terms)

Race	**Disability**	**Education**	**Intersection**	**Assessment**	**Supports**
Culturally Diverse	Neurodivergence	Schools	Relationship	Identification	Programs
Linguistically Diverse	Special Education	Schooling	Connection	Diagnostic	Services
Minority/ Minoritized	Special Needs	Elementary School	Overlap	Psycho-educational	IEP
Racialized	Learning Disability	Secondary School	Interconnection	IPRC	Inclusive Education
Ethnically Diverse	Learning Needs	Ontario Schools	Intersectional Identities	UDL	LD
Research scope	Research conducted in Ontario				

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