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# Seeing the Whole Student: Addressing Bias in Special Education Supports

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## Use this guide to reflect, discuss, and take action toward more equitable special education practices.

Ontario has made important progress over the decades in supporting students with special education needs. You may wish to reflect on how your school and board are continuing to strengthen the identification of students' strengths and needs and to better connect assessment with timely intervention. Yet inequities in access, identification, and support continue to persist.

You're working hard to support every student — but what if the systems you rely on are unintentionally reinforcing historical biases or systemic barriers?

**Reflection Prompt**
Think of a student you've taught who was referred for assessment — or wasn't. What shaped that decision? Who was involved? What was the outcome?

In Ontario, many racialized students with learning disabilities (LDs), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or other neurodivergent profiles are being misidentified, misunderstood, or underserved. Sometimes their needs are framed as behavioural problems. Sometimes families are told to "wait and see." And sometimes, the supports they need simply don't exist in their school or are difficult to access without persistent advocacy. This isn't about bad intentions. It's about a system that was never built with all learners in mind.

**Bias doesn't just shape how we think about students — it shapes who gets seen.**

## What the Research Shows

Our recent review of research from 2010 to 2025 shows that racialized students — especially Black boys — are more likely to be identified with behavioural exceptionalities, and less likely to be formally identified with LDs or ADHD. Assessment tools often reflect Eurocentric norms, making them less accurate for multilingual or culturally diverse students. Families from newcomer or low-income communities face longer wait times, more gatekeeping, and fewer supports when navigating the Individual Education Plan (IEP) or Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) process. And school environments have a powerful effect on student identity: those who are misidentified or excluded may internalize stigma, while students who receive timely, identity-affirming support are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and consequentially thrive.

**Pause and Consider**

- How might long waitlists or limited access to professionals affect the students in your school?
- To what extent do the support services offered by practitioners reflect the identities and lived experiences of students, helping to reduce the risk of misidentification?
- Looking back, how has your understanding of students' strengths and needs evolved or become clearer over time?

You don't need to overhaul your classroom to make a difference. Small shifts in mindset and practice can interrupt bias and improve equity for all learners. Start by rethinking "readiness." Students from different cultural, linguistic, or neurodivergent backgrounds may show learning differently. Instead of asking whether a student is ready for the next level of learning, consider what supports might unlock their learning to thrive in new ways.

Pause and reflect on patterns in referrals. Who gets referred for assessments in your school? Who doesn't? Before labelling a student as "lazy," "defiant," or "disengaged," consider whether the behaviour might be related to a learning challenge, exposure to trauma, or a mismatch between instruction and need.

> **Bias operates not only in perception but in process — influencing who is referred, how needs are interpreted, and whose potential is recognized.**

Use plain language when developing IEPs and talking to families. Many caregivers don't know they can request assessments, appeal decisions, or ask for accommodations — especially when English or French isn't their first language. Centering families as partners builds trust and improves outcomes.

Integrate universal tools into your practice. Graphic organizers, audio versions of texts, visual schedules, and flexible response options (like voice recordings or slideshows) help everyone, not just students with IEPs. When these tools are used universally, stigma is reduced and access expands.

Finally, examine the hidden curriculum. Do your materials reflect the identities and lived experiences of your students? Are the strategies you use affirming for racialized and neurodivergent learners? Inclusion isn't just about who is present in the room — it's about what they experience once they're there.

Inclusion is not simply about placing students in regular classrooms. It's about removing systemic and classroom-level barriers — from assessment practices to instructional design to school culture. Ontario's education system is evolving. As educators, you are central to that change.

> **Inclusion is not a destination or a single classroom. It is a system that adapts to the learner.**

**Try This**

Choose one small change to implement in your classroom this month to meet the needs of a student who may be struggling.

- Consider how you might shift your language when talking about student "readiness." Try emphasizing strengths and potential rather than using terms that suggest deficit or blame.
- Explore a universal support you could introduce for all students, such as a visual schedule or audio instructions. What other tools might help create a more accessible learning environment?
- Reflect on how you communicate with families about IEPs or other supports. How might you simplify and clarify these processes to make them more accessible for newcomers or families whose first language is not English or French?

## Further Resources

- LD@school: Resources
- TA@l'école : Ressources pédagogiques
- Diagnosed through Bias: Unpacking the Intersection of Race, Disability, and Inclusion in Special Education in Ontario – Full Report (PDF)
- Parents of Black Children: Education Guide
- Justice for Children and Youth: Special Education Rights Guide
- People for Education (2024): Access to Special Education

## About the Authors

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## LD@school

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