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# Educational equity in Canada: the case of Ontario's strategies and actions to advance excellence and equity for students

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## ABSTRACT

Canada prides itself for being multi-cultural, valuing diversity, and having educational outcomes that have been identified as excellent and equitable with above average performance and lower than average impact of socio-economic status and immigrant status in PISA. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, plus policies concerning child care, language rights, immigration, and Indigenous people have affected equity. However, there are long-standing and emerging inequities, particularly for Indigenous people. Within this context, this article examines the case of Ontario, a province which has become well-known for educational excellence and equity. Two main strands of system-wide strategies to advance educational equity are discussed. First, a focus on closing the gaps in educational achievement and improving student success. This strategy resulted in improved performance for students overall and reduced gaps in performance for sub-groups of students, including attention to gender, English Language Learners and Special Education Needs. However, these measures did not fully address other demographic factors, systemic inequities and multiple forms of discrimination. A second strand of work was developing strategies and actions to advance an equitable and inclusive education system, including a broader concept of equity to support students and staff with changes in classrooms, schools, districts and the province.

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## Introduction

Canada prides itself for being multi-cultural, valuing diversity, and having educational outcomes that have been identified as both excellent and equitable. At the federal level, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, plus policies concerning child care, language rights, immigration, and Indigenous<sup>1</sup> people have affected schooling across Canada. However, there is, in fact, no national

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education system in Canada or a federal education department. School-age education is the individual responsibility of ten provinces and three territories. This article selects the case of Ontario, a province which has become well-known for its commitment to educational excellence and equity. I argue that there have been two main strands to this work. First, a focus on closing the gaps in educational achievement and improving student success. Second, developing strategies and actions to advance an equitable and inclusive education system. While the policies and practices associated with each strand can be traced chronologically; both strands co-exist and operate in combination. In this article, I trace these key policy developments at a system level and consider the implications for district and school leaders.

### **The national context: educational equity in Canada**

Canada is a large, diverse country with a current population of almost 37.5 million people (Statistics Canada 2019a), including a foreign-born population of almost 20% (OECD 2015a) and an Indigenous population of almost 6% (Statistics Canada 2018). Central to Canadian national policy is a commitment to multi-culturalism. Cepin and Naimi (2015, 68) explain that ‘diversity and difference are heralded as defining features of a Canadian approach’ to our country and for our education systems. In contrast to the US metaphor of a ‘melting pot’ implying cultural assimilation, the oft used Canadian metaphor is of a ‘cultural mosaic’ where people integrate into Canadian society but retain, celebrate and value the diversity of their identities, cultures, ethnicities, histories and experiences. This approach became enshrined in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, established in 1971, and formalised in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, established as law in 1988.

All school-age children who are resident in Canada have access to free, publicly funded school education in either French and/or English language (see Campbell et al. 2017). The federal government is responsible for funding and support for First Nations students who attend on-reserve, band operated schools. Approximately 60% of First Nations students attend these schools (AANDC 2015). The history and continuing consequences of the governments’ treatment of Indigenous populations are major issues:

... for many years the governments answer to First Nations education was residential schools — educational institutions run by the churches that forced Native children to leave their homes to be educated at boarding schools. Students lived at the schools and were not permitted to speak their native tongue, engage in spiritual ceremonies, or dress in their traditional clothing in an attempt to assimilate them into the dominant culture. While the experiences of children at such schools varied, many students were subjected to years of abuse and mistreatment, which has contributed to intergenerational effects including family violence, substance abuse, and a deep mistrust of the education system as a whole. The last residential school in Canada closed in 1996, and in 2008 former Prime Minister Stephen Harper

apologized to Canada's Indigenous peoples, acknowledging that 'the consequences of the Indian Residential Schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage and language' (Government of Canada, 2008, 3). As part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the government also launched the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to investigate and document awareness among the general public and begin the momentous task of healing and moving forward together. (Campbell et al. 2017, 10–11).

### The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report concluded:

The Commission heard from more than 6,000 witnesses, most of whom survived the experience of living in the schools as students. The stories of that experience are sometimes difficult to accept as something that could have happened in a country such as Canada, which has long prided itself on being a bastion of democracy, peace, and kindness throughout the world. Children were abused, physically and sexually, and they died in the schools in numbers that would not have been tolerated in any school system anywhere in the country, or in the world.

...

Getting to the truth was hard, but getting to reconciliation will be harder. It requires that the paternalistic and racist foundations of the residential school system be rejected as the basis for an ongoing relationship. Reconciliation requires that a new vision, based on a commitment to mutual respect, be developed. It also requires an understanding that the most harmful impacts of residential schools have been the loss of pride and self-respect of Aboriginal people, and the lack of respect that non-Aboriginal people have been raised to have for their Aboriginal neighbours. Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem; it is a Canadian one. Virtually all aspects of Canadian society may need to be reconsidered. (TRC 2015, v – vi).

The 94 Calls to Action extend to all aspects of Canadian society. At its core, however, the TRC is fundamentally about education with calls for improvements to legislation, policies, resources and supports for education for Indigenous peoples, and also calls to ensure education for reconciliation involving curriculum and teaching to educate all people in Canada about the historical and contemporary experiences and contributions of Indigenous peoples and to include Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing throughout the education systems. In the words of the TRC: 'The way we educate our children and ourselves must change' (2015, 317).

The Government issued formal apologies and accepted all TRC recommendations. While there has been increased funding and action, there remains concerns that – to date – the government's actions have been inadequate.. In 2019, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) concluded:

The truths shared in these National Inquiry hearings tell the story – or, more accurately, thousands of stories – of acts of genocide against First Nations, Inuit and Métis women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA<sup>2</sup> people. This violence amounts to a race-based genocide of

Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, which especially targets women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. This genocide has been empowered by colonial structures, evidenced notably by the *Indian Act*, the Sixties Scoop, residential schools, and breaches of human and Inuit, Métis and First Nations rights, leading directly to the current increased rates of violence, death, and suicide in Indigenous populations. (MMIWG, 2019, 1-2).

The 18 Calls to Justice issued included ‘Calls for Educators’ ‘to educate and provide awareness to the public about missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, and about the issues and root causes of violence they experience’ and for ‘all educational service providers to develop and implement awareness and education programmes for Indigenous children and youth on the issue of grooming for exploitation and sexual exploitation.’ (MMIWG, 2019, 79). Again, the Government accepted the National Inquiry report, issued an apology and stated its intent to take action. We wait now to see whether change will happen to act on the truths documented and to pursue justice and action.

Therefore, the issue of educational equity in Canada is a complex history and present of serious and persisting inequities and also of future hope and opportunities. Overall, Canada is one of a handful of countries that are both high performing and equitable in PISA (OECD 2015a). Canada has consistently achieved about the average performance results in PISA by jurisdictions in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and has better than average outcomes for gender equity, less impact of socio-economic status on educational outcomes, and high achieving results for immigrant students (OECD 2015b). In PISA 2015, using the OECD’s index for economic, social and cultural status (ESCS), the ‘percentage of between school variance in science performance explained by students’ and schools’ ESCS’ was 7.3% in Canada compared with an OECD average of 62.9% (OECD 2015a, 202). In the same assessments, there was no difference in performance between non-immigrant, 2nd generation and 1st generation immigrant students; whereas across the OECD countries, immigrant students generally achieve lower performance results. However, as discussed above, there are concerns that First Nations students overall achieve below the Canadian average in national and international assessments (CMEC, 2015; Parkin 2015).

### The case of the province of Ontario

Ontario has a large and growing population, accounting for 38.6% of the population of Canada overall (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2019). In the 2016 Census: 29% of the population were immigrants, 29% were visible minorities, and 3% self-identified as Aboriginal persons (Statistics Canada 2019b). There are over 2 million students enrolled in Ontario’s K-12 publicly funded education system. This system is administered by 72 school districts involving a total of almost

5,000 schools in four education systems (English Public, English Catholic, French Catholic, French Public). These education systems are funded through provincial taxation that is then distributed to school districts using a funding formula. This means that there are not large disparities in funding (although some local schools benefit more, for example, from parent and community fundraising).

In the sections below, I discuss the approaches to educational equity developed and implemented during 2003-2018.<sup>3</sup> The history of educational equity in Ontario is, of course, longer standing. The Ontario Human Rights Code came into effect in 1962 with commitments to equal rights and opportunities and to ending discrimination and harassment linked to race, colour, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, disability, creed, and age. In 1993, under a New Democratic Party (NDP) government, the Education Act was revised through a Policy and Program Memorandum, PPM 119, to require the *Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Anti-racism and Ethnocultural Equity*. However, with a change of government in 1995: 'to the Conservatives led by Mike Harris had dire consequences for the development and implementation of PPM No. 119.' (Segeran and Kutsyuruba 2012, 17). For example: 'The Harris government eliminated the Ministry's Anti-Racism, Equity and Access Division that had been incorporated to develop anti-racism and diversity programming within Ontario's schools.' (Parek, Killoran, and Crawford 2011, 253). The Conservative governments from 1995–2003 implemented policies to increase accountability, standardisation and austerity in Ontario's education system. The effects were most pronounced for disadvantaged and/or lower performing students, for example with declining supports and achievement results for English Language Learners and students with Special Educational Needs (Leithwood, Fullan, and Watson 2003) and the (re)introduction and expansion of academic streaming, which negatively affected racialized and minoritized students' course options and pathways in and beyond school (Parek, Killoran, and Crawford 2011).

In 2003, the political landscape of Ontario changed with the election of a Liberal government with a stated commitment to education as their number one priority. In the subsequent fifteen years, there was sustained development of system-wide strategies to advance improvements for all students, including attention to developing school leadership practices to support priority goals for improved student outcomes. During this time, Ontario gained international recognition for becoming a jurisdiction that was successfully achieving both excellence and equity in educational outcomes (for example, Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber 2010; OECD 2010). Below I trace the development of policies and practices through two strands of focus: closing the gaps in educational achievement and improving student success; and developing strategies and actions to advance an equitable and inclusive education system.

### ***Strand 1: Closing the gaps in educational achievement and improving student success***

The newly elected government announced three education priorities:

- Increased student achievement
- Reduced gaps in student achievement
- Increased public confidence in publicly funded education.

Two central strategies were key to reform: The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy for elementary schools and the Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy for secondary schools. Both strategies included attention to capacity building and supports for developing district leadership and school leadership to advance the above goals.

The Literacy and Numeracy Strategies began with the announcement of an Every Child Program:

On June 24, 2004, the Ontario Ministry of Education put in place several actions to support greater achievement of literacy and numeracy for children in Kindergarten to Grade 6. New resources were allotted to provide intensive teacher development and ongoing support, smaller class sizes (Kindergarten to Grade 3), more focused curriculum with a daily emphasis on literacy and numeracy, targeted supports for low-achieving schools through turnaround teams, and innovation funds for local initiatives. The Every Child Program also included extensive training and capacity building for teachers and principals to raise performance in elementary schools. As well, there has been extensive support for provincially funded local innovations and the sharing of successful programs across the school system to improve students' reading, writing, and math skills. A new provincial Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat was established to provide expert co-ordination of these initiatives and resources and to develop new working relationships between government, districts, and schools. (Glaze and Campbell 2007, 3).

A nine-point Literacy and Numeracy Strategy was initiated, including: school district improvement plans and targets; teams to support improvements in literacy and numeracy at regional, district and school levels; supports for capacity building for district and school leaders and for teachers in literacy and numeracy instruction and in advancing equity of outcomes through supporting lower performing students, parent and community engagement, and contributing to national and international knowledge about system-wide strategies for educational improvement (Glaze and Campbell 2007). A major focus was building professional capacity and leadership at all levels of the education system (province, district, school and classroom) to understand, lead and implement effective practices for literacy and numeracy instruction for all students and particularly for currently underachieving student groups. The next phase of development was phrased as 'Sharpening Our Focus' (Glaze and Campbell 2007, 24) and involved becoming more precise in the implementation of literacy and

numeracy practices and – through the use of achievement data – identifying and providing targeted interventions and supports for schools that were lower achieving and/or struggling to improve and student groups in need of additional supports. Since this time, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy continued to evolve through periods of consolidation to ensure deep understanding of knowledge, skills and practices to support student achievement in literacy and numeracy and periods of expansion to increase the spread and scale of implementation and impact across Ontario’s almost 4000 elementary schools (see for example, Campbell 2014).

The first phase of the Student Success Strategy focused on developing school district leadership capacity. The Ministry began a process of developing provincial and district level Student Success Indicators, which included students’ credit accumulation, meeting literacy graduation requirement, course selection, school leaver rate, and Grade 7 and 8 students ‘at risk’ due to very low achievement in English or French and/or Math (see Zegarac and Franz 2007, 8). The Ministry invested in the appointment of Student Success Leaders at a senior management level in every school district ‘to support a focus on success for all secondary school students.’ (Zegarac and Franz 2007, 12). These Student Success Leaders, in collaboration with colleagues, were charged with developing a Student Success Action Plan:

The Action Plans were to be structured around what were called the four themes within the Student Success strategy: increasing literacy learning; increasing numeracy learning; creating pathways to post-secondary destinations, and creating within schools a sense of community, culture and caring supportive of student engagement. (Zegarac and Franz 2007, 12).

The next main phase of the Student Success Strategy focused on the identification of struggling students and actions to ensure each of these students had access to an individual in school whose job it was to provide them with care and guidance to ensure they were supported in their choice of secondary school programmes, their progress and success into post-school destinations. The Ministry invested in increasing the number of teachers hired in secondary schools and also creating the position of a designated Student Success Teacher (SST) with release time working in secondary schools to directly support struggling students. Student Success Teams were also formed:

The Teams are composed, at minimum, of the SST, Principals, the Special Education teacher, Guidance teacher and any other teachers or school staff thought to be helpful to implementing the strategy in the schools. (Zegarac and Franz 2007, 15–16).

The Government also introduced legislative and regulatory changes to increase the school leaving age and to expand the range of learning pathways and credit options available to graduate. As detailed in Zegarac and Franz (2007, 15), accompanying policy changes included:

- A new Specialist High-Skills Major within the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) that will allow students to complete a minimum bundle of courses in specific high-skills areas of concentration that lead to employment sectors, apprenticeships and post-secondary destinations
- Expanded cooperative education programmes provided in partnership with business and community organisations. To broaden the recognition of experiential learning, students were able to choose up to two co-operative education credits and one career education or learning strategies credit toward their 18 compulsory credits.
- Dual credit programmes designed to enable high school students to earn credits by participating in apprenticeship training and postsecondary courses that would count towards their OSSD and postsecondary diploma or degree. The new style of learning proved successful in School-College Work Initiative projects which were piloted across the province.
- Coordinated efforts to build formal links between high schools and postsecondary destinations to help students reach higher goals.

Both the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and the Student Success Strategy included priority commitments to equity of opportunities – for example, students’ pathways in secondary schools – and equity of outcomes, as measured by literacy and numeracy achievement in elementary schools and high school graduation rates. A range of policies were developed and implemented for specific student populations. For instance:

- For English Language Learners: *Many Roots, many voices. Supporting English language learners in every classroom. A practical guide for Ontario educators.* Ontario Ministry of Education (2005a) and *Supporting English Language Learners: A practical guide for Ontario educators Grades 1–8* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2008a);
- For the French-language education systems: *Ontario’s Aménagement Linguistique Policy for French-Language Education* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2005b);
- For gender gap in literacy: *Me Read? No Way! A practical guide to improving boys’ literacy skills* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2004) and *Me Read? And How? Ontario teachers report on how to improve boys’ literacy skills* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2008b);
- For Indigenous students: *Ontario First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2007a) and *Building Bridges to Success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Students: Developing Policies for Self-Identification: Successful Practices From Ontario School Boards* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2007b);
- For students identified as having Special Educational Needs: *Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students*

with *Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6*. (Ontario Ministry of Education 2005c) and the *Essential for Some, Good for All* initiative (see Hargreaves and Braun 2011; Hargreaves et al. 2018).

A central element throughout the education strategies was a focus on developing leaders and leadership practices at all levels of the education system. In 2008, an Ontario Leadership Strategy was established, with the view that:

School leaders have a profound impact on student achievement, second only to teachers among school related factors, and play a critical role in fulfilling our educational priorities: increased student achievement, reduced gaps in student achievement, and increased public confidence in publicly funded education. (Ontario Ministry of Education 2008c, 1).

Two priority goals were established:

1. Attract the right people to the principalship
2. Help principals and vice-principals develop into the best possible instructional leaders (Ontario Ministry of Education 2008c, 1).

An Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) set out five key domains of leadership practices to be developed and demonstrated by principals and vice-principals:

1. Setting Directions
2. Building Relationships and Developing People
3. Developing the Organization to Support Desired Practices
4. Improving the Instructional Program
5. Securing Accountability. (Leithwood 2012).

A revised version of the OLF added 'Personal Leadership Resources,' specifically:

Cognitive Resources: Problem-solving expertise, knowledge about school and classroom conditions with direct effects on student learning, systems thinking;

Social Resources: including ability to perceive emotions, manage emotions, and act in emotionally appropriate ways;

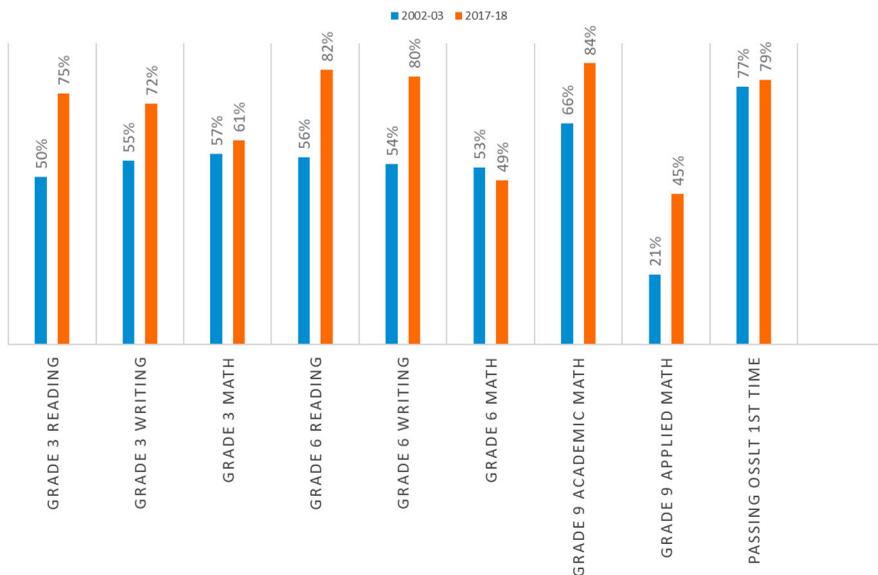
Psychological Resources: Optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, proactivity. (Institute of Educational Leadership 2013, 22).

The specific leadership practices embodied in the OLF – which is also used for school leaders' performance appraisals – prioritised a form of leadership where the principal is the leader of the organisation and an instructional leader for developing staff and students. School leaders were expected to use a K-12 School Effectiveness Framework to identify specific areas to become priorities in annual School Improvement Plans with linked targets to be achieved. It

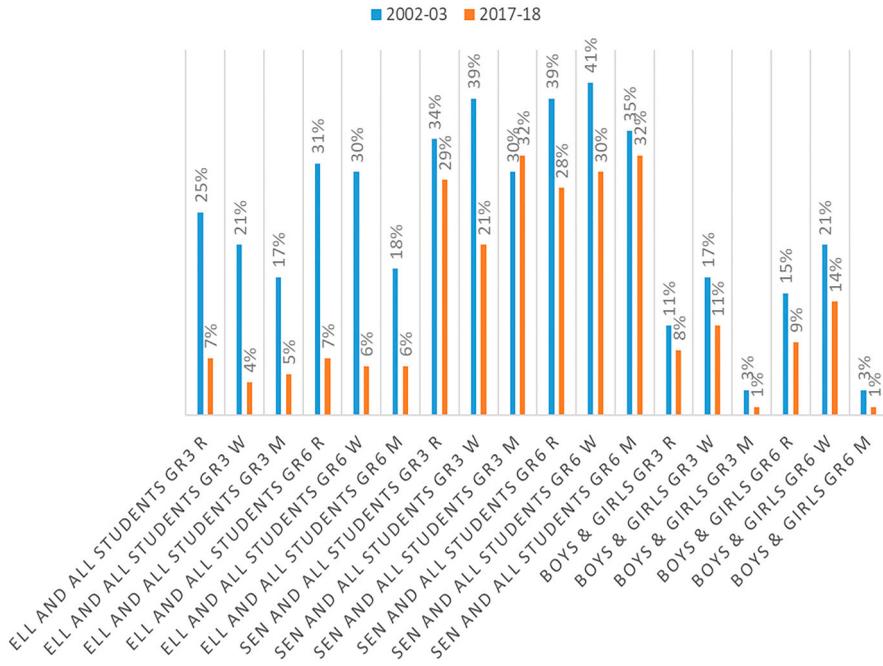
is notable that the OLF does not include the word ‘equity’ at all, rather the version of equity implicit is one of supporting all students to achieve improved performance and reducing gaps in performance for specific groups of students.

In examining the impact of these strategies and practices for the goals of increasing student achievement and reducing gaps in achievement; although results fluctuated over time and for specific grades and student groups, the overall trend was one of improvement. Comparing the overall achievement results in provincial testing in 2002–03 (the year prior to the Liberal government) and 2017–18 (the final year of the Liberal government): the percentage of students achieving the provincial standard had improved in all assessments (Reading and Writing in Grade 3 and 6, Math in Grade 3 and 9, and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test), with the exception of Grade 6 Math. As indicated in [Figure 1](#), for the majority of assessments, the improvement has been substantial with double-digit percentage point improvements.

With an emphasis on ‘closing the gaps,’ the gaps between English Language Learners, students with identified Special Education Needs and all students overall and between boys and girls have decreased for all Grade 3 and 6 assessments, except for students with Special Education Needs in Grade 3 Math (see [Figure 2](#)). Again, the level of change is substantial in many cases and particularly pronounced for English Language Learners where the ‘gap’ previously ranged from –31 to –17 percentage points across assessments in 2003 to a gap of –7 to –4 percentage points in 2018. With an emphasis on also raising the bar and closing gaps for the performance of schools; other notable data includes the shift from 19% of elementary schools with 34% or less of their students



**Figure 1.** Percentage of Students Achieving Provincial Standards, 2003 Compared to 2018.



**Figure 2.** Percentage Point Negative Gap between All Students and ELL and SEN Students and between Boys and Girls on Provincial Assessments.

achieving the provincial standard in Grade 3 Reading in 2003 to only 5% of elementary schools by 2006 (Glaze and Campbell 2007) – the number of low performing schools has subsequently remained around or below 5% (Campbell 2014).

However, there has been criticism that defining equity of outcomes in terms of standardised achievement results is a narrow, inadequate and problematic approach. Certainly, being proficient in reading, writing and math are essential knowledge and skills and graduating high school successfully is associated with a range of future benefits throughout a person's life. So, in essence, these are necessary components of equity in and through education. However, concerns about the cultural relevance and bias, lack of attention to Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, and appropriateness of modifications for students with Special Education Needs, language learners and newcomers to Canada in the design, administration and reporting of provincial standardised assessments have been raised (Campbell, Clinton, Fullan, Hargreaves, James and Longboat 2018). The provincial assessment agency – the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) – is currently working to make equity and inclusion as central priority of their modernisation plans (EQAO 2018). If the assessments themselves are inequitable in content and outcomes; using them as a measure of equity is problematic. Furthermore, the disaggregated data reported in provincial assessment reports is by gender, Special Education

Needs and English/French language learners. Raising concerns about the stereotypical construction and focus of gender in Ontario's policies for boys' achievement in literacy assessments, Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2013, 590): 'emphasize that such policy articulation, in terms of 'gap talk' and use of numbers, overshadows a commitment to addressing and tackling "the underlying causes of educational failure".'

Analyses of data from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) – the largest school district in Ontario – indicated inequitable opportunities, experiences and outcomes for Black students, contrasted to White students and other racialized students leading to concerns about the impact of academic streaming, suspensions and expulsions, progress and pathways to graduation and post-school destinations (James and Turner 2017). Analyses using Statistics Canada data and/or TDSB data indicated the intersectionality of race, ethnicity and socio-economic status having negative consequences for students' educational opportunities, pathways and course options in school and the outcomes achieved in formal assessments (Parek, Killoran, and Crawford 2018).

In summary, the focus on literacy and numeracy achievement and high school graduation rates are important goals and can be part of an equity strategy to support students to have equitable opportunities and outcomes from schooling. However, while a necessary component, the focus on closing gaps for individuals and groups of students is inadequate and insufficient without wider attention to the multiple forms and intersections of inequities in education and society. This requires also a reconsideration of the role of education leaders and their leadership practices in perpetuating or disrupting inequities.

### ***Strand 2: Developing strategies and actions to advance an equitable and inclusive education system***

In 2008, the Minister of Education requested the development of a system-wide Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. The resulting policy – *Realizing the promise of diversity: Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2009a) – outlined 'the need for action' including the fact that: 'Racism, religious intolerance, homophobia, and gender-based violence are still evident in our communities and – unfortunately – in our schools.' (p. 7). Contextual and demographic data concerning the number and range of languages spoken in Ontario (over 200 languages), increasing religious diversity, that the majority of new immigrants to Canada select Ontario as their home, the increasing number of lone-parent families and same sex couples, and that Aboriginal peoples are the fastest growing population followed by visible minorities are cited as 'The Changing Face of Ontario' (Ontario Ministry of Education 2009a, 8).

The Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy retains the goal of reducing gaps in student achievement but updates definitions of diversity, equity and inclusive education:

**DIVERSITY:** The presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

**EQUITY:** A condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people. Equity does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences.

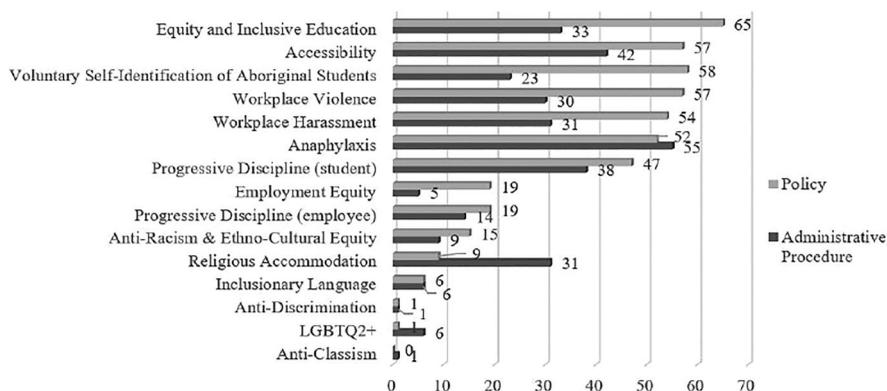
**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION:** Education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected.

New guidelines and policies were introduced to implement ‘a system-wide approach to identifying and removing discriminatory biases and systemic barriers’ (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b, 3).

At the time of launching the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, the Ministry’s analyses concluded ‘only forty-three of Ontario’s seventy-two school boards report that they currently have some form of equity policy in place.’ Going forward, priority required actions were:

- the ministry to provide direction, support, and guidance to the education sector, so that every student has a positive learning environment in which to achieve his or her highest potential;
- each school board to develop and implement an equity and inclusive education policy and guidelines for the board and its schools; and
- each school to create and support a positive school climate that fosters and promotes equity, inclusive education, and diversity. (Ontario Ministry of Education 2009a, 11).

**Figure 3** Considerable activity occurred to advance the implementation of equity and inclusive education plans and actions. Shewchuk and Cooper (2018) identified 785 equity policies and administrative procedures established across Ontario’s 72 school districts, with the main types of policies and procedures being: overall equity and inclusive education plans; accessibility; voluntary self-identification; workplace violence; workplace harassment; anaphylaxis; and progressive discipline. This suggests that the concept of school board’s having Equity and Inclusive Education plans was widely taken up. It also suggests wide-ranging views of, and actions for, what is to be included in the concept of equity and inclusive education – from overall plans to student accessibility to demographic data to staff and student safety to medical conditions. Notably: ‘many issues remain largely under-represented across school districts,’ including anti-racism and ethno-cultural equity, anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQ2+ people’, and ‘only one administrative procedure directly addressed classism and socio-economic equity procedure.’ (Shewchuk and Cooper 2018,



**Figure 3.** School Board Policies and Administrative Procedures Related to Different Equity Issues (Source: Shewchuk and Cooper 2018, 930).

931). Therefore, while committed to removing systemic barriers and discrimination in all forms, some of the most ingrained and pressing inequities – linked to issues of race and ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation, and poverty – required considerably more focused attention.

In 2012, the Accepting Schools Act was introduced to amend sections of the Education Act concerning anti-bullying strategies and reporting of bullying, developing a positive school climate, professional development for educators, and supports for student-led activities and clubs concerning, awareness, understanding and respect for gender equity, anti-racism, disabilities, and sexual orientation and gender identities. As well as ensuring students are safe at schools, the Act includes that:

students need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, attitude and values to engage the world and others critically, which means developing a critical consciousness that allows them to take action on making their schools and communities more equitable and inclusive for all people' (Government of Ontario 2012, 1).

Curriculum revisions were also undertaken to ensure equity and inclusive education goals and priorities were integrated.

The expansion of the concept and approaches to equity was further accelerated by a renewed vision for education in Ontario, *Achieving Excellence* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2014). The goal of reduced student gaps in performance was considered to have made progress and a new broader goal of Ensuring Equity was introduced: 'All children and students will be inspired to reach their full potential, with access to rich learning experiences that begin at birth and continue into adulthood.' (Ontario Ministry of Education 2014, 3). With an emphasis on identifying and supporting struggling students, especially at key transition points pre-during-post school and in their lives, nine actions were outlined including specific attention to, supports for First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultures, languages histories and students, rural and remote communities, students

with special education needs, youth in care, adult learners in high schools, and francophone communities.

A specific focus on, and broader understanding of, equity was central to a new Equity Action Plan announced in 2017. This Plan is notably explicit that there are persisting inequities, systemic barriers and biases that are negatively affecting Ontario's children and young people, the staff who work in education, and the communities they serve: 'As we have grown to better understand these issues, it has become clear that further action is required.' (Ontario Ministry of Education 2017, 5). With increased data and research capacity in the Ministry and education sector, the Equity Action Plan cited concerns about differential outcomes and post-school destinations for students in applied rather than academic tracks in secondary school and that these students are predominantly from lower income communities. Analyses of expulsions and exclusions data similarly revealed inequitable practices and outcomes: 'racialized students, Indigenous students, students with disabilities, and students with special education needs are overrepresented in the data on suspensions and expulsions.' (Ontario Ministry of Education 2017, 16). Overall, in contrast to a previous relatively positive narrative about closing achievement gaps, the new Plan stated:

While we have achieved much for students, we continue to observe poorer outcomes for disproportionate numbers of students from low-income environments, racialized students, Indigenous students, students who identify as LGBTQ or Two-Spirited, children and youth in care, students with disabilities, and students with special education needs. (Ontario Ministry of Education 2017, 15).

Concerns were also identified that the demographic composition of the education workforce, particularly in promoted positions such as school principals, did not reflect the diversity of the student population.

The Plan stated that fundamental commitments to human rights needed to be embedded in all aspects of the education system. Four main areas of attention were outlined (Ontario Ministry of Education 2017, 16–19). First, *School and Classroom Practices*, including attention to culturally relevant and inclusive teaching and curriculum, reforming Grade 9 pathways, collection and analyses of suspensions, expulsions, and exclusions data, and approaches to engage parents, especially disadvantaged and/or disengaged communities. Second, *Leadership, Governance and Human Resource Practices*, with actions to include increased attention to equity, inclusion and human rights in training for educators and school board trustees and in performance appraisals for school and system leaders, and increasing diversity in the recruitment and promotion of the education workforce. Third, *Data Collection, Integration and Reporting*, including the development, collection and use of voluntary identity-based student data and also for workforce data. And, fourth, *Organizational Culture Change*, where 'The Ministry of Education must lead by example,' including identity-based data about the Ministry's workforce, human rights training for senior

management, and reviewing diversity in Ministry appointments and advisory committees (Ontario Ministry of Education 2017, 19). The approaches embodied within the evolving equity strategies and plans were consistent also with, and informed by, national issues and concerns – particularly the TRC recommendations – as well as experiences, outcomes and identified concerns within the provincial education system.

Therefore, while there remained attention to raising achievement and reducing gaps in performance, it was explicitly recognised that wider policy, governance, leadership, structural and cultural attention to systemic inequities would be vital to fully realising Ontario's commitment to valuing diversity and supporting all students to learn, progress and succeed within and beyond their schooling. Whereas the original Ontario Leadership Strategy emphasised getting the 'right people' (Ontario Ministry of Education 2008c, 1) to be school principals, it was now explicitly recognised that attention and positive action for recruiting administrators from traditionally under-represented populations was vital. Furthermore, training and development was needed for all education leaders to understand systemic and structural inequities and how their actions can contribute towards disrupting historical patterns and creating more equitable opportunities, learning environments and outcomes for students and staff. Whereas in strand 1 of the Ontario strategies, School Improvement Plans were linked to indicators of school effectiveness (primarily teaching and learning considerations); school leaders were now to have explicit policies and practices concerning equity, diversity, inclusive education, and a safe school culture respectful and supportive of all students, staff and parents/guardians/families.

## Conclusions

From the Ministry of Education's perspective: 'Equity and excellence, therefore, go hand in hand.' (2009a, 6). In PISA, Canada is a country and Ontario is a province that has excellent and equitable educational outcomes by international comparisons, where gender, socio-economic and immigrant status do not have the same level of negative consequences for reduced educational achievement or inequitable outcomes as is typical across the OECD. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and a range of policies and commitments to support children and young people are at the heart of valuing diversity and advancing equity. However, there are long-standing, persisting and emerging inequities. The history, legacy and continuing evidence concerning Canada's Indigenous populations is clear that it is long-past time to take serious action to bring about change. The education system of federal residential schools was the cause of trauma and, now, the education system must be the central force for reconciliation to support Indigenous students to succeed and to educate all people about Indigenous histories, contributions, and knowledge.

Within Ontario, approaches to educational equity have evolved over time with changing governments and changing local and national contexts. For 15 years (2003-2018), the government of Ontario prioritised educational excellence and equity. As part of major system-wide strategies, the first strand of activities was focused on 'closing gaps' as measured by students' performance in assessments. A lesson from Ontario is that when there is focused attention, over a period of time, on specific goals – in this case, literacy and numeracy achievements and high school graduation rates – improvements can happen. There is little to no gap in provincial assessment results for elementary students linked to gender or being an English/French language learner. Gaps for students with Special Education Needs have reduced, but still remain substantial. There is much that can be learned from these strategies and outcomes for other education systems seeking to advance equity. At the same time, there was no province-wide data concerning other demographic groups and their experiences, progress and outcomes at this time. Over time, new data collection and research using various sources identified a range of concerning inequities for students' pathways in schools, experience of being suspended or excluded, and differential progress to graduate (or not) and post-school destinations. Furthermore, defining and measuring educational equity on a narrow range of performance outcomes is inadequate to fully understanding the wider contexts, processes and outcomes of inequity. In Ontario – as elsewhere – systemic inequities, structural barriers, bias and discrimination were being experienced by students and by staff. The next strand, therefore, was to explicitly identify and address systemic inequities and the full range of forms of discrimination. Several increasingly expansive definitions of equity, diversity and inclusion were developed and embedded into legislation, strategies, plans, actions and monitoring involving all levels of the education system. These strategies aimed to change the contexts, conditions and cultures of classrooms, schools and the wider education system. There has been a high level of activity. Attempting to develop the necessary awareness, understanding and actions to seriously disrupt systemic inequities is essential; it is also challenging, complex and contested work.

With these evolving strands and strategies, school leaders and their leadership practices were expected to change also. The Ontario Leadership Strategy and Framework of leadership practices emphasises instructional leadership and the work of school principals in developing School Improvement Plans, linked to evidence of school effectiveness measures, to establish priorities and actions each year to improve student outcomes. With the introduction of the new Education Equity Strategy and linked actions, issues concerning inequities in the hiring of people into formal leadership positions, the need for all leaders to have training concerning understanding systemic inequities and actions that can be taken in the education system including schools, and the need for schools to have explicit policies and actions for equity, diversity, inclusive education and safe school cultures were established. Therefore, in the case of Ontario, it's not a question of

excellence *or* equity in education. The lesson is clear that targeted supports, including leadership development and leaders' actions, are essential for realising excellence *and* for addressing equity.

## Notes

1. Indigenous is the term used to encompass First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations.
2. The National Inquiry has chosen to use the term '2SLGBTQ' (representing Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning people). By putting '2S' at the front, we are remembering that Two-Spirit people have existed in many Indigenous Nations and communities long before other understandings of gender and orientation came to us through colonization. (MMIWG, 2018)
3. Following the provincial election of June, 2018, a new Conservative government are currently in power.

## Disclosure statement

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