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A Pan-Canadian perspective on the professional knowledge base of learning disabilities

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Abstract

This study explores the professional knowledge base of learning disabilities (LD) in Canada by examining the pre-service training of both teachers and psychologists, as well as the existence of policy designed to guide their work. Particular attention is given to assessment practices and the process of developing academic accommodations for these students. Since education in Canada is completely a provincial and territorial jurisdiction, the authors were interested in exploring commonalities of educational policy and standards of knowledge among the professionals charged with responding to the needs of these students. Findings acknowledge that there exists great diversity in both the professionals who work with students who have LD and in actual models of support that schools offer. Nonetheless, the study raises questions on the knowledge base in LD and the need for enhanced professional development opportunities, and supports a dialogue for common policy in Canadian schools.

Introduction

Since the phrase "learning disabilities" (LD) was first coined in the early 1960s, it has quickly dominated the discourse of special education policy and practice. Lerner and Johns (2009) identify this as the largest population of students accessing special education supports in our school system, and outline that "during the four plus decades since LD was first recognized, the

field has wrestled with many controversial issues, and our notion of LD is different from what it first was" (p.9). Mercer and Pullen (2009) track this evolution of understanding to its current phase called *turbulent period* (p.5), and note "social, political, economic and professional forces of change are resulting in major effects on the field" (p.10). LD is generally defined as students with at least average intelligence who, due to a neurological impairment, struggle to fluidly process information on levels commensurate with their peers. As a result, they struggle to learn via traditional approaches and often require accommodations or supports to allow them to display their knowledge and ability. Consequently, the debate around these students often involves identification practices and definition of reasonable accommodations. As a result, teacher training and educational policy are often topical issues among parents and professionals.

This article will establish a global and a Canadian context for these *professional forces of change*, as a backdrop for the findings of a Pan-Canadian review of policy, practice, and minimal training requirements for new teachers and psychologists. What emerges is the realization that these challenges facing Canadian schools are global challenges, and interventions and policy must be anchored in current research. While consensus may never be achieved, or even desirable given the increasing pluralism of our societies, programs will be increasingly effective if they are informed.

A global debate

While the phrase LD has long moved into the general vernacular of contemporary educational discourse, definitions, and approaches to accommodation remain "under considerable scrutiny and criticism" (Klassen, 2002, p.199). This debate occurs on a global level with practitioners and decision-makers struggling to find efficacious ways of responding to the needs of these student, while balancing concern for accurate identification with collaborative planning (Mellard et al., 2004; Harrison, et al., 2005; Lyon et al., 2005; Dombrowski, et al., 2006).

This global shift towards collaborative planning in identification is reflected in Australian schools, where school psychologists are seen as collaborators with teachers and parents in focusing on how to help children learn more than “test” students (Klassen et al., 2005). He cites similar policy shift in countries such as Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom - all of which rely more on a student’s progress with curriculum than standardized test scores in the identification process.

Lyon (2005) supports this approach and calls for policy shifts away from relying on test scores to inform programming, towards greater use of multidisciplinary approaches to both identification and intervention. In the United States, this policy shift is increasingly evident with the popularity of the *Response to Intervention* model where decisions on programs and labels are made by the instructional team (Kavale, et al., 2006). Dombrowski et al. (2006), recognizing this shift toward effective programs in contemporary educational contexts, state that despite these gains in service and awareness, “there are many unresolved issues in definitions, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment. In order to solve some of these issues, it is imperative to achieve consensus in the field...” (p. 362). Lyon (2005) agrees with this and calls for additional research which informs educational policy, professional development *and* instructional practices.

This global debate on effective policy and professional knowledge is, in part, fueled by the concern for the social/emotional and economic effects of having a learning disability. Chief among those concerns is the realization that academic underachievement continues to be a dominant characteristic of this population of students (Shafir & Siegel, 1994; Wilson & Lesaux, 2001). Other long-term concerns include: limited graduation rates and/or post-secondary participation (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Rojewski, 1999); social/emotional struggles (Barwick & Siegel, 1996; Vallance & Wintre, 1997; Wiener, 2004); struggles with sustained employment (Haring, et al.,

1990; McAfee & McNaughton, 1997); and significant family stress for those raising a child with an LD (Dyson, 2003; Park et al., 2002).

The Canadian context

While educational policies, practices and definitions of exceptionalities in Canada are completely provincial and territorial jurisdictions, the rights of these students are protected by common case law and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms¹. However, Klassen (2002), in reviewing educational practice in Canada, found that definitions and practices, both on assessment and accommodation, are less protected by law/policy and susceptible to shifting and fragmentation. He notes that “among the provinces, a number of different operational definitions are currently in use” (p.199) and that in the absence of federal law to regulate educational practice, the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) has played a crucial role in leading the field. Nonetheless, Klassen concludes that the field of LD has grown significantly in this country and that all provinces and territories provide some type of support to students. However, a recent study by Kozey and Siegel (2008), examining definitions of LD across the Canadian regions, found continued interprovincial variability and concern for effectiveness of instruction planning. They conclude that “the current emphasis of Canadian provincial and territorial LD definitions on diagnostic features is potentially at odds with the purposes of educational evaluation, which is for needs assessment and intervention planning purposes” (p. 167). Likewise, Edmunds and Martch-Litt (2008), in a pan-Canadian review of assessment practices for students with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), found inconsistencies of practice, few diagnostic guidelines and vague theoretical foundations to inform the field. While ADHD is not considered as LD, there are significant similarities and a high rate of co-morbidity (Lerner & Johns, 2009; Mercer & Pullen, 2009).

¹ See Exceptionality Education Canada, 2002. V11 (2-3) for a detailed overview of educational policy in Canada.

Equally alarming are the results of a 2008 national study on teacher readiness to identify or respond to diverse learning needs. Crocker and Dibbon (2008) report that while 90% of Canadian school principals rank training in educational assessment as very important, only 7% of them report that current graduates are well prepared in this area. They go on to report that while 81% of school principals rank training in accommodating diverse needs as important to new teachers, only 8% felt that current graduates are prepared.

In 2007, Wilson and Furrie added to the concern for Canadian students with the release of a three-year study entitled *Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities (PACFOLD)* (LDAC, 2007). The study was unique in that it was the first time that researchers accessed the database of Statistics Canada to examine the impact of living with or having a child with a disability. Supplementing the quantitative data accumulated by Statistics Canada, the researchers conducted a series of focus groups across Canada with individuals with LD, as well as with their families. Subsequently, the report provided solid Canadian data on Canadian practice and, as such, afforded a broad national perspective on the impact of policy and practice.

A dismal picture emerged, revealing that Canadians with LD were: twice as likely to drop out of school; significantly underachieving in even functional literacy; less likely to experience stable employment; more likely to report dramatically higher levels of stress, depression, anxiety, suicide ideation, and poorer mental/physical health than the general population. Moreover, the report outlined that nearly one third of families with children who have LD cannot afford the supports needed to help their children succeed. Like the individuals themselves, their families reported high levels of stress and mental health issues and a greater tendency towards single parent, low income lifestyles. The report concludes that:

PACFOLD demonstrates how the issues Canadians with LD face are both linear and cyclical. They are linear, in that there is a direct correlation between the problems not identified in school, and/or not

accommodated in school, with the end result of low literacy levels. This, in turn, impacts the employment opportunities and the financial situations of people with LD. The issues are cyclical, because these challenges feed into one another. Low literacy levels, higher rates of unemployment, lack of independence, and lower incomes contribute to higher rates of poor to fair mental and physical health, and impact the relationships of people with LD (LDAC, 2007, p.7).

The PACFOLD findings articulated a Canadian perspective of long-standing perceptions on the struggle which these students encounter. It recommended a review of identification procedures, accommodation policies/practices, and the development of common definitions and standards of practice. It also reiterated the need for "...compulsory courses in teacher training programs on students with special needs..." and "...enhanced professional development..." (LDAC, 2007, p.9).

However, in a country as diverse as Canada, where education is exclusively a regional domain and where post-secondary institutions stipulate training programs for professionals, reaching consensus might be a lofty goal. Nonetheless, attempting to resolve the tensions and complexities involved in maintaining the status quo or facing the challenges of striving towards consensus does warrant debate. Given an increasingly mobile Canadian population, a national perspective becomes critical as families and students move between provinces and encounter diverse practice and policy. While there is a call to standardize practice and policy, the absence of common discourse on best practices serves to protract progress.

Purpose

It is within this debate, certainly against the flurry of recent studies on Canadian practice (Klassen, 2002; Kozey & Siegel, 2008; Crocker & Dibbon, 2008; Edmunds & Martch-Litt, 2008) that the researchers undertook to examine both pre-service training requirements for psychologists and teachers, and the establishment of policy on assessment and accommodating students with LD in Canadian provinces and territories.

More specifically, we were interested in exploring the perceptions of the provincial and territorial Directors of Student Support Services (i.e. the senior managers at Ministries of Education responsible for special education programs) on policy and practice in the field of LD. The goal was to explore the range of assessments, and the processes used to develop and evaluate academic accommodations, as well as the professional knowledge base of those involved in these processes. Given that the findings of the PACFOLD study contextualized the reality of Canadians with LD, the researchers sought to begin an exploration of the knowledge base in LD of professionals working with these students. Specifically, the objective was to ascertain the minimal training requirements specific to LD for educators and psychologists and the existence of policy to guide both assessment and accommodation. The goal was to continue the debate that the PACFOLD study had initiated.

More specifically, the study had the following objectives:

1. to identify provincial education policies that guide assessment and accommodation of children with LD in the K-12 system;
2. to identify provincial procedures used to develop and secure academic accommodation for students with LD;
3. to identify the minimal training in LD for new teachers in each of the provinces;
4. to identify the minimal training in LD for new psychologists in each of the provinces;

Design and methodology

The research was conducted in 2007, funded by a grant from Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador (via the Henry Collingwood estate), in partnership with the LDAC. Ethics approval was received, and signed consent was obtained from those identified as key informants. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized in the collection and analyses of data. Surveys and semi-structured interviews were used, and data were analyzed through Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS),

and a grounded theory approach. Given the scope of the study and the different perspectives of the key informants, the data were collected in three distinct phases: pre-service training in LD for teachers (Phase 1); pre-service training in LD for psychologists (Phase 2); and educational policy on assessment and accommodation of students with LD in the secondary school system (Phase 3).

Phase 1.

The registrars of teacher certification in each of the 13 regions of Canada were identified as key informants. A letter of introduction was forwarded, explaining the nature of the study and outlining the two questions they would be asked:

1. Do you require a course on LD for certification as a teacher in your region?
2. Do you require a course on developing academic accommodations for students with LD for certification as a teacher in your region?

Participation was outlined as voluntary - participants were given the option to respond in writing, or schedule a telephone interview. A 92% response rate was obtained.

Phase 2.

The registrars of the board of examiners in psychology in each of the 13 regions of Canada were identified as key informants. A letter of introduction was forwarded explaining the nature of the study and outlining the two questions they would be asked:

1. Do you require a course on LD for certification as a psychologist in your region?
2. Do you require a course on developing academic accommodations for students with LD for certification as a psychologist in your region?

Again, participation was outlined as voluntary - participants were given the option to respond in writing, or schedule a telephone interview. A 70%

response rate was obtained.

Phase 3.

The Directors of Student Support Services in each of the 13 regions of Canada were identified as key informants (including anglophone and francophone directors in two regions resulting in 15 respondents). Letters of introduction and a schedule of questions (see Appendix 1) were forwarded. Once signed consent was obtained, telephone interviews were scheduled. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and later forwarded to the directors for triangulation of the data. A 100% participation rate was obtained.

Findings

The study yielded a wealth of data that has the potential to inform our understanding of national practice and fuel a debate on the professional knowledge base of LD in Canada. It is particularly timely as Canadian provinces and territories move closer to inclusive models of education in which classroom teachers, the primary care provider for all students, rely on support of professionals, such as educational psychologists.

Phase 1 & 2: Pre-service training for teachers and psychologists

Results from the first phase revealed that none of the regions responding require new teachers to have either a course in LD, or in developing academic accommodations for students with LD (see Table 1). However, approximately 50% of the regions do require new teachers to have either a generic course, or specific competencies, in learner diversity. Of the 92% of regions who responded, it appears that teachers enter their profession with little, if any, awareness of the nature of LD, or knowledge of their role in accommodating these students.

**Table 1:
Pre-service training of teachers in LD**

| Question | Yes |
|---|------|
| Do you require new teachers to have a course completed in the nature and characteristics of LD before certification as a teacher in your region? | 0/13 |
| Do you require new teachers to have a course completed in developing academic accommodations for students with LD before certification as a teacher in your region? | 0/13 |

Source: 92% of provincial/territorial registrars of teacher certification.

It is important to note that, while six regions reported that they require new teachers to have a generic course in understanding diverse learners, they were uncertain whether LD was included in course content.

Likewise, the responding participants indicated that not one region requires new psychologists to have either a course in LD, or in developing academic accommodations for students with LD (see Table 2). Hence, out of the regions responding (70%), it appears that psychologists enter their profession with little, if any, awareness of either the nature of LD, or their role in accommodating these students.

**Table 2:
Pre-service training of psychologists in LD**

| Question | Yes |
|--|------|
| Do you require new psychologists to have a course completed in the nature and characteristics of LD before registration as a psychologist in your region? | 0/13 |
| Do you require new psychologists to have a course completed in developing academic accommodations for students with LD before registration as a psychologist in your region? | 0/13 |

Source: 70% of provincial/territorial registrars for boards of examiners in psychology.

Key informants outlined that psychologists are trained as generalists in the discipline of psychology, and that it is incumbent on them to declare a competency in areas of practice, such as working with students who have LD. They added that it is also the responsibility of psychologists to remain current in their knowledge and training and ethical in their declaration of competency. However, none of the regions monitor or track professional development or competency after initial certification.

Phase 3: Educational policy on assessment and accommodation

In phase three, the researchers interviewed the provincial Directors of Student Support Services regarding policies on assessment and accommodation in their regions. The data that emerged yielded descriptive and contextual insights on the issues facing Canadian educators in the field of LD. Subsequently, data are presented according to the themes inherent in the core questions.

Do you have a policy specific to LD?

None of the regions reported having a specific policy on LD – either assessment or accommodations. However, all did report having a general special education policy that references procedures addressing all exceptionalities. One region referenced a teacher handbook specific to accommodating students with LD.

Which professionals assess and diagnose students with LD in your region?

This question garnered lengthy responses. Educational psychologists were named by 12 regions as assessors of students with LD. Three regions named “qualified” individuals who had the required training, specifically listing counselors, speech pathologists, and pediatricians. Nonetheless, six regions voiced concern for the availability of suitably trained psychologists, who were ready to work in educational settings. While recruitment of psychologists was the biggest issue, procuring people with a background in education who could work with classroom

teachers was a concern. Four regions noted that this concern was growing, as their region moved toward demanding a doctorate degree as a requirement for registration as a psychologist.

Four regions voiced concern about long wait-lists for assessment, while three regions identified the growing numbers of families seeking private services as worrisome. Two regions expressed the need for culturally-appropriate assessments, and awareness of the complexities of assessing students with cultural linguistic variation. Two regions identified a need to have a standard national definition of LD, and three others expressed the desire to move away from a deficit model of identification. Finally, five regions reported efforts to move toward a “response to intervention model”, where interventions were administered prior to a definitive diagnosis. There was universal acceptance of the need for early assessment and intervention.

What training is required for those professionals engaged in assessment and accommodating LD in your region?

All regions reported that qualifications for psychologists are the responsibility of boards of examiners in psychology while registrars at departments of education assume responsibility for teachers. Once certification has been obtained, school districts assume that employees are suitably qualified to assess. They did, however, note the range of diversity in the area of assessment among professionals within their jurisdictions.

Do these professionals have to maintain licensure with a professional organization in your province?

Nine regions reported it was their understanding that some type of certification was required for professional designation with some other provincial body. There was uncertainty regarding what would happen

if a professional lost certification with this external organization, as union contracts determine reprimand and dismissal.

What is your understanding of the requirements for continuing education in order for these professionals to maintain professional certification?

All regions reported uncertainty about requirements for continuing education in professionals engaged in practice. Unanimously, they reported that they assumed some guidelines existed, but felt such guidelines were more implied than monitored.

Does your province promote team-based assessments of students with LD? If so, how is this working in your region?

All regions reported a shift towards “team-based” assessments as their preferred practice, one in which teams of different professionals brought diverse perspectives on the needs of the students and worked collaboratively to identify children’s needs and supports. The majority (11 regions) stated that these teams are often led by the person most trained in assessment (often the psychologist), but that all members contribute to the process. Concerns were registered, including: the ambiguity of training in assessment/LD among team members; the time required to coordinate, meet, and plan (especially in geographically diverse areas); and the need to access specialized services to support the team. Interestingly, only two regions mentioned the involvement of parents in the assessment process. (In both of these cases, strong culturally-appropriate approaches were advocated).

Which professionals identify academic accommodations for students with LD?

There was universal agreement on employing a “team-based approach” in identifying the supports for the student, and the classroom teacher was frequently identified as leading this process.

This was underscored by the trend towards inclusive classrooms, in which the classroom teacher is the central support person, accessing services from other team members. Again, fragmentation in the knowledge base of LD among team members was noted as problematic, as was access to resources and training. However, all regions reported that while the assessment was an event in the student's academic career, the development of accommodations and supports was an ongoing process. Again, interestingly, only three regions named parents as involved in this process.

Additional concerns raised

Key informants were asked whether there were other concerns not identified in these questions. While a general discussion ensued, the transcriptions (validated by the key informants) identified the following points:

- Definitional ambiguity between national, provincial and medical understandings was apparent in four regions. While the LDAC has a clear definition, it may or may not be provincially recognized and does not necessarily match medical language used in Diagnostic and Statistical manual – IV (DSM-IV). While educators strive to categorize children for funding, and labels are designed to direct intervention, a concern arises when children have co-morbid issues, especially when medical diagnosis and “severity of disability” can result in more intense support. DSM-IV does not use labels such as Dyslexia and is much more ambiguous on diagnostic criteria than provincial/territorial Ministries of Education. Respondents stated that there was a need for a shared understanding of LD between health care practitioners and educators and a shared, clear and succinct national understanding. This concern is underscored by the significant cultural/linguistic differences in the country.
- While fragmentation of knowledge regarding assessment, identification and accommodation was often mentioned by all regions in the above questions, five regions specifically reiterated a need for strengthened

pre- and post-service training for all professionals involved with these students.

- There was also concern noted for the feasibility of an inclusive model to meet the needs of students with severe LD. These concerns were linked with fragmentation of knowledge.
- Responding to the needs of rural communities and schools was as particularly challenging. Concern was voiced that limited availability and training of professionals (psychologists, in particular) had more devastating effects for people in rural contexts.

Implications and Summary

The findings of the three phases of this study identify areas of needed debate and additional research on the readiness of educators and policy-makers to respond to the holistic needs of students with LD. The authors readily acknowledge that the results of this study offer a broad perspective on these issues and, therefore, run the risk of presenting a bleaker picture than actually exists for some of these students. Nearly all respondents identified that general special education policy includes service provision for students with LD, and the very identification of fragmentation implies diversity in programs and policy. Likewise, the authors also acknowledge diversity of training and knowledge among teachers and psychologists who are currently working with these students. However, these findings, coupled with recent research on Canadian practice and framed by the global literature, do lend direction to this debate. It is telling that in the last year alone three other studies (Kozey & Siegel, 2008; Crocker & Dibbon, 2008; Edmunds & Martch-Litt, 2008) provide current Canadian data that accentuate the significance of this debate.

Policy formation and professional knowledge

One recurrent, dominant theme in this debate is a call for shared understandings of LD and instructional programs. Lyon (2005) calls for a continuation of efforts to clarify an understanding of LD and states that

“replicated research findings must inform educational policy... professional development and instructional practices” (p. 142). Klassen (2002) supports this, and states that professionals engaged in the field of LD, researchers, educators, and policy makers “need to attempt to be less driven by ideology and popular conceptions of disability, and to make decisions based on more objective theoretical considerations” (p. 215). Keough (2005) specifically calls for a more effective classification system that will address the issues of differentiating diagnosis, deal with the ambiguities between educational understandings of LD and medical understandings outlined in DSM-IV, and result in effective intervention. Mellard et al (2004) add to this international call by stating that as diagnostic approaches and understandings shift, so must the perceived role for professionals and stakeholders, especially within highly individualized societies and cultures.

This call for effective policy formation is occurring amidst growing involvement of parents and community groups in educational practice and educational decision making (Canadian Education Association, 2007). Community involvement is accentuated by a decline of public confidence in government’s leadership in education. The Canadian Education Association (2007) reports that only “...19% of Canadians have a lot of confidence and faith in their provincial governments when it comes to educational policy, while 45% have some and 33% have little or no confidence/respect” (p.11). As educational programs continue to shift toward inclusive approaches, whereby the regular classroom teacher assumes a greater role in meeting the needs of students with LD, this debate grows. In a country as diverse as Canada, central to any policy for inclusive schools is a need for greater involvement of local stakeholders, who can contextualize philosophy with regional realities (Ainscow, Farrell & Tweddle, 2002).

Jordan and Stanovich (2004) advocate that a prerequisite step to inclusion will be the articulation of effective policies that will give teachers clarity of

role and responsibility, as well as a strong sense of their efficacy. Enhanced knowledge and concise policy would be prerequisites to this.

Professional training for inclusive classes

This recognition of the need for policy to guide effective programs for inclusive classrooms gives rise to need for a debate and research of the professional readiness of teachers to work in such settings (Waldron & McLesky, 1998; Klinger et al., 1990; Buysee et al., 2003; Zigmond, 2003; Brown et al., 2004; Wiener, 2004). Lyon (2005) supports this observation, and states more definitively that “teachers are not trained to address individual learning differences in general, and are not prepared to teach students from highly diverse backgrounds with a range of complicated learning difficulties” (p. 142). More recently, provincial reviews of special education policy have raised concern as well. Philpott (2007), in a review of Newfoundland and Labrador’s programs, concluded that 87.4% of teachers report little or no training in the area of diversity (p.96). Likewise, a similar report in Alberta (Government of Alberta, 2006) raised concern for initial teacher training, and recommended improving teacher education programs, expanding professional development initiatives, and ensuring competent teachers who are ready to face the demands of diverse classrooms. Finally, a review in Nova Scotia (Government of Nova Scotia, 2007) outlines that “the results of the review point to a need for further development of the capacity of school boards and community schools to respond to the special needs of their students” (p.35). It goes on to call for increased training of all personnel involved in the program planning for these students. These concerns for teacher training are well recognized, leading LDAC to issue a clear statement on inclusive education:

The LDAC does not support full educational inclusion or any policies that mandate the same placement, instruction, or treatment of all students with LD or the idea that all students with LD must be served only in regular education classrooms at the exclusion of all other special education placement options. LDAC believes that full inclusion, when defined this way, violates the rights of parents and students with disabilities guaranteed by the *Charter of Rights and Freedom* and

Human Rights Codes which guarantee education equality and freedom from discrimination and rejects the arbitrary placement of all students in any one setting (LDAC, 2005b. p.1).

Despite these concerns, “inclusive education is an issue within the context of Canadian society, not just within the context of Canadian schools...In Canada, if we choose to teach, we are choosing to teach in inclusive settings” (Hutchinson, 2007, p. xxv).

Challenges unique to Canada

While policy formation and teacher training in Canada continue to reflect the global literature on LD, more unique to Canada are the challenges of our increasingly diverse society. Recent demographic shifts in the Canadian population, coupled with an increasingly mobile population, is expanding our notion of what “diverse classrooms” actually means and adding a whole new complexity to the need for debate and research. Results of the 2006 census identify an increasingly diverse cultural profile in Canada in which more than 20% of the population will be from a visible minority by the year 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2007a). Of particular note is the aboriginal population, which increased by 45%, nearly six times faster than the 8% rate of increase for the non-aboriginal population since 1996 (Statistics Canada, 2007b). The aboriginal population is also dramatically younger, having a median age of 13 years with almost one-half (48%) of all aboriginal people being under 24 years of age (Statistics Canada, 2007c). Moreover, there are more than 200 languages spoken in Canada, with 20% of the population reporting a mother tongue other than English or French, a growth of 18.5% since 2001 (Statistics Canada, 2007d).

In addition to the increase in cultural diversity, Statistics Canada identifies inter-regional migration as having a significant impact on our schools. The 2006 census shows that the population shift toward urbanization and western migration has resulted in families moving between provinces (and

varying school policies and practices) at an increasing pace (Statistics Canada, 2008).

The implications of this diversity in contemporary educational practice and policy will be challenging, certainly as it relates to identification and accommodation of the learning needs of students. Discussion will have to explore whether common policy is possible, given regional concerns and characteristics. Can one policy be effective for regions as diverse as Nunavut, Toronto, and rural Newfoundland? Such mobility of students will further accentuate the fragmentation of policy and practice among the regions, leading to more vocal parents and increasingly challenged teachers. Concern about the readiness of teachers to face such diverse environments is equally compelling, given cultural and linguistic variation, as well as learner diversity. Identifying, assessing and accommodating difference is a much broader concept than current constructs imply. Much of the research needed to inform this debate will be uniquely Canadian

This study strengthens and informs the Pan-Canadian backdrop needed for this debate to occur, and calls for additional research that will help advance knowledge, and thereby anchor both policy and practice in the multitude of factors that challenge education in the contemporary Canadian context.

Appendix A: Schedule of questions for Directors of Student Support Services.

1. Do you have a policy on assessment of students with suspected Learning Disabilities (LD)? Please specify.
2. When was this policy developed? Discuss the factors, in your opinion, that led to its development.
3. What professionals are assessing and diagnosing children with LD? Please elaborate on any areas of concerns you may have regarding this practice.
4. What training/certification is required for assessment/diagnosis of LD? Please elaborate on areas or concerns you may have regarding training/certification.
5. Are there required courses on LD in pre-service training for these professionals? Please elaborate on your perspectives on the adequacy of this training.
6. Are there required courses on assessment in pre-service training for these professionals? Please elaborate on your perspectives on the adequacy of this training.
7. Do these professionals need to maintain licensure with a professional organization to practice in your province? Please elaborate on concerns you might have pertaining to this.
8. What is your understanding of the requirements for continuing education for these professionals to maintain certification in your province/territory? Please elaborate.
9. Which professionals identify academic accommodations for students with LD? Please elaborate.
10. Does your province promote team-based assessment of students with LD? In your opinion, how is this working in your province/territory? Please elaborate.
11. In your opinion, what do you feel is needed to strengthen the identification and remediation of LD in your school system? Please elaborate.
12. Additional comments?

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