

A Review of School Board Professional Student Services Supporting Special Education in Ontario

Executive Summary Highlights
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Research Method

Initially, the research planned to describe the level of professional student services provided to students within a full service school team model and compare to the level of service provided through external partnership agreements. The research design included survey instruments and interviews of school board employees and a thorough literature review.

For a variety of reasons, many research applications were denied by school boards. The non participation of so many school boards posed a serious barrier to the previous research plan. In February, 2007, the research shifted from the full study to conducting focus groups. **Nineteen (19) focus groups were conducted with ninety-three (93) participants.** Focus groups were conducted with unionized and non unionized professional student services providers in large and small, urban and rural Public and Catholic English language school boards. None of the Francophone boards were approached in this phase of the research. A focus group was held with the Chief Psychologists of Ontario School Boards and with a group of senior administrators from a school board that volunteered to participate. Additional information was provided by a Chief Psychologist by telephone and by a Speech & Language Pathologist (SLP) in a separate meeting.

Involvement of the OSSTF Professional Student Services Personnel Sector

The researcher wishes to extend appreciation for the participation of union members in approaching school board staff, organizing meeting dates, times and locations. The research could not have progressed this far without their assistance.

Data Analysis and Findings

Handwritten notes of the principal researcher were analyzed thematically and categorized by employee group. The themes included: issues and concerns, service delivery and successful programs.

Issues and Concerns

Four focus groups were held with principals. The most important concerns for principals were service delivery, the rise in complex mental health needs and behavioural issues that students are exhibiting and insufficient funding and/or funding reductions. These concerns varied in order of importance depending on geographic location, size of student population or size of school board area.

Eleven focus group sessions were held in unionized and non unionized environments with student services professionals (PSSP) in Catholic and Public English language school boards. The most commonly cited issues and concerns related to funding. Specifically, in response to service cuts by other ministries or decreases in school board funding, PSSP services are vulnerable to staff cuts, reduction in services or increasing caseloads. A related concern is that these reductions in service are occurring in an educational environment where students' needs are increasing, becoming more complex and, in some cases more violent. PSSP participants noted that previous, related research studies have identified similar concerns.

Three groups of senior administrators/managers consistently identified the increasing complexity of student needs and the challenges of maintaining staffing and service levels. One board's senior administrators identified many challenges with operationalizing the interministerial collaborative projects.

Service Delivery

Principals described large variation in existing service delivery models. In summary, principals felt that services provided by the board or outside agencies should be delivered in the school. Principals felt that service delivery was enhanced by the availability of the existing infrastructure in the board, the detailed knowledge of the student, family and community context as well as parental willingness to access the services delivered in the school.

The Chief Psychologists described many examples of moving beyond an assessment focus to “value added” services. These included, but were not limited to consulting with other teams, delivering professional development, participating in parent feedback sessions when outside providers complete assessments.

PSSP participants described large variation in their roles and responsibilities across the province. Often participants described a pattern of increasing caseloads and decreasing staff due to funding cuts or enrollment growth.

PSSP duties ranged from conducting assessments only to providing prevention, intervention and consultative services, professional development workshops for parents and teachers as well as parent/student advocacy for outside services. The most positive comments related to a PSSP role that included participation as part of a multi-disciplinary team at the school level. Participants cited the benefits of immediacy of service, improved communication, the enhanced ability to respond to the complexity of student needs, parental confidence in school based services and a deep knowledge of school culture, family, school and community contexts and curriculum linkages. PSSP participants make recommendations that are aligned with this understanding.

There is a recognition that this type of service delivery is difficult to quantify. Documenting practitioner tasks fails to capture the additional PSSP time spent by board staff conducting follow up activities after outside agencies complete assessments, the informal and impromptu consultations about students not formally identified and not normally on a case load, informal support to teachers, background research, referral to outside services etc.

PSSP practitioners cited many examples where interministerial cooperation works in theory but not operationally. Targeted initiatives result in some duplication, and some inefficiencies of service delivery that may not meet the board’s needs. A Third Party Protocol assists with role clarification and avoids duplication of service.

Senior board administrators described a variety of service delivery models currently operating. Service delivery is not exclusive to identified students. Participants identified the increasing complexity of students’ mental health needs, decreases in funding and the sustainability requirements of targeted Ministry initiatives as challenges to service delivery. When services are delivered by non board personnel, Third Party Protocols are helpful to prevent service duplication and to help structure and define roles.

Conclusions

Participants in all groups offered many examples of successful programs for identified and non identified students at the elementary and secondary levels. The increasing incidence and complexity of student mental health and behaviour needs was identified

across all participant groups. Participants in the focus groups clearly indicated that services should be delivered in a school based model.

The assumptions underpinning the government's current practice of interministerial collaborative projects and targeted funding of initiatives need to be closely examined. Interministerial collaborative projects are supported in principle, but the development of new infrastructure is a duplication of existing school board infrastructure and uses time and money that fails to reach the student population. Reductions in service or service gaps can result when outside agencies offer services based on their funding, not on student needs.

Targeted initiatives may not address specific board needs and may raise false expectations that the service will be available in the long term. The Learning to 18 initiative has the potential for increased workload for PSSP staff.

A wide range of service delivery exists from assessment only to models that include consultation services, participation in multidisciplinary team consultation, group or class preventative programs, and direct intervention with individual students and support to teaching staff and parents. Both PSSP and Principals identified that the preferred model is to deliver services in the school.

A significant difference was noted in the level of complexity and number of outside agencies that exist in each community between northern and southern Ontario boards. Increased population density results in increased complexity. Most PSSP practitioners articulated that the programs and services of outside agencies that enhance or extend their services were very welcomed.

Next Steps

The results of Phase 1 lead us to believe that little new information would be gained by continuing with more interviews and focus groups. Consistently, participants articulated that programs and services delivered to students through the school was preferred and offered the greatest opportunities for success. Equally common was the articulated observation that the numbers of students needing professional student services related to mental health and behavioural issues are increasing and that those student needs are increasing in complexity.

Phase 2 of the research should build on the findings from Phase 1. Phase 2 should incorporate the existing successful service delivery practices to develop a school based, best practice model for the delivery of professional student services to students.

* A copy of the full Research report from Phase 1 is available upon request from Domenic Bellissimo at the Provincial Office of the OSSTF. bellisd@osstf.on.ca

**Literature Review:
A Review of School Board Professional Services
Supporting Special Education in Ontario**

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Purpose

The research seeks to investigate whether the level of professional student services provided to students through external partnership agreements or specially funded initiatives is comparable to the professional student services performed by board employees who are part of the full service school team. In addition, the research will describe “best practices” in professional student service delivery in the province. Further, the research will inform the Ministry of Education’s deliberations on a new special education funding and delivery model. The research is guided by five themes: (1) accessibility of services (2) quality of service, (3) the continuum of services, (4) cost effectiveness and, (5) the professional multidisciplinary team approach.

Abstract

Public schools are possibly the most integrated institutions in society. In them, students from many different religious, cultural, racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds come together on a daily basis to learn. These students bring to the classroom an eclectic mix of ideas, beliefs, ambitions, values and personalities. The role of the school goes well beyond promoting simple tolerance. At their best, public schools foster a profound understanding and respect between individuals and groups that is the basis for democratic citizenship. (Alberta Teachers' Association 2002, 48)

Parents, Students, Governments, Teachers Federations and Unions, and private provider agencies of professional student services have all contributed to the development of programs which seek to enhance the capacity of the end user, students, in the public education system. The service models created are in place to give the student (end user) every opportunity to integrate and navigate the public school setting with success. The measurement of success is limiting as it currently is framed around graduation rates and not inclusive to other aspects of societal contributions. There remain various entry points for most stake holders in the Special Education debate in order to assess a concrete success rate. The measurement process for success remains vague as each stake holder group from governments, teachers and unions, private provider agencies, communities, parents, and students have provided a variety of arguments for what and how to determine success within this field. The broad milieu of literature illustrates that there is not one simple direction and formula that can succinctly define a success rate and that would be common amongst the aforementioned group’s desires. The purpose of this document is to examine the existent literature which expresses the interests of who should provide special education services and illustrate the need to conduct extensive research within the area of service providers.

Keywords

Evaluation, assessment, teacher federations, unions, special education, service providers,
Background

Introduction

With the dominant discussion within the literature around inclusion policies for integration of Special Education into the mainstream school setting there is little which addresses an evaluative component of service providers. Asking the question of who can and/or should provide the school based services is important to all stakeholders involved. In so doing an opportunity exists to allow accountability in how services are rendered and whether the implementation of such services should be relegated through a model which is diverse model that can be mandated throughout the various school boards in Ontario. This research is guided by five themes as stated in the purpose of the research project:

- (1) accessibility of services
- (2) quality of service
- (3) the continuum of services
- (4) cost effectiveness
- (5) the professional multidisciplinary team approach

The relevant literature on the five themes speaks in a general term to each. The general focus of this review was to elicit literature which directly and indirectly consummated the relevance of the five themes specifically with the role of service providers. The role of service providers remains an integral part of the discourse when rationalizing the processes of change within Ontario education. The Special Education Transformation document states as a prime objective in Special Education Funding Allocation that “[S]chool staff have the capacity to provide supports and interventions to meet the needs of students in a timely and effective manner.”(Bennett 2006, 21) This objective illustrates that teachers have maintained the knowledge and ability capacities to facilitate the learning process of students with special needs within the school setting. Although the section does not speak directly to the provider of the service it does leave open the need to interrogate the question of who the service provider is. Accountability operates amongst a layer of facets within education and the teacher’s role is central to analyzing the successes and failures of such processes.

The ability to measure effective strategies which enhance the learning capacity of special needs students while determining the best practices of how the services are provided should be an integral function for all stakeholders and is the fundamental goal of this research.

Teachers in Alberta have embraced a culture of accountability and are prepared to work closely with the parents and communities served by their schools to evaluate progress, to identify local priorities for improvement and to work with the entire school community in achieving those priorities. School-based planning and reporting, when undertaken genuinely rather than in technical fulfillment of ministry requirements, can contribute significantly to this process.(Alberta Teachers' Association 2002, 51)

This accountability is a fundamental facet of the research by integrating the five themes outlined in the introduction and attempting to elicit the required tangible evidence on service providers.

Summary of Literature

The role for public education is to provide a substantial equitable base for all students so they can participate within the societal niche regardless of their social status.

Cuba's emphasis on providing access to schooling for all children extends to those with special needs and is one of the initiatives accounting for the country's virtually universal primary enrollment. "The public role in education is to be there for students who otherwise would not be able to develop their talents in full.(...) Compensatory schemes provide stability to the education system and social cohesion, which is so necessary in a society".(Gasperini 2000, 15)(15)

The case in British Columbia illustrates that members of the British Columbia Teachers Federation have been providing these services both directly and indirectly within the school system. The discrepancies that exist within Ministry guided special needs assessments have left some students who require services within a regular classroom and not designated as special needs students. These students remain under the radar but the teachers still engage with them utilizing their diverse practices to tend to the needs of the student. In British Columbia board employees are considered to be working with non-recognized special needs students within the regular classroom setting.

In terms of class composition, responses indicate that most teachers work in classrooms that integrate significant numbers of students with special needs, making integration an everyday norm of B.C.'s schools. The data also provide evidence of considerable diversity in schools, with a wide range of students with special needs in many classrooms. They also present evidence that teachers believe that many more students with special needs are in schools but are not recognized as such by Ministry designations.(Naylor 2002, ii)

When taking into account the five themes developed for the research the example of what is occurring in British Columbia it may be fair to assume that a similar system of operations may be happening in Ontario schools. This assumption recognizes a need to develop an evaluative research strategy which can directly assess the benefits of specific service providers whether they are board employees or external agencies. The case of British Columbia does not include a component which can provide an assessment of the services provided.

The role of school boards is to allocate the resources necessary to comply with Ministry end user demands. This can be accomplished through evident practices already in place which situate the role of the teacher in the school setting as crucial to the development and implementation of successful special needs practices. The case of Alberta recognizes the appropriateness of service providers in the school setting and defines the agenda of how school boards must provide services in the Standards for Special Education:

7. School boards must:

- a. ensure teacher practice is in keeping with the Teaching Quality Standard
- b. ensure teachers know and apply the knowledge, skills and attributes to accommodate individual differences for students with special education needs

- c. support teachers' ability to monitor the effectiveness of their practices and adjust practices as necessary.(Alberta Learning 2004, 9)

The Alberta case involves a monitoring component where evaluation of services can be measured by school boards. This allows for the accountability that stakeholders may be searching for as well as providing opportunities to close gaps where success of goals has been limiting. Again the Alberta Standards for Special Education state:

14. School boards must:

- a. use planning, assessing, monitoring and reporting to improve the quality of education provided to students with special education needs
- b. monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of special education programming and services
- c. report expenditures and achievements related to special education programming and services as part of the annual planning and reporting cycle.(Alberta Learning 2004, 12)

Through the innovative research process outlined by the Principal Researcher the monitoring of board staff will be a significant contributor to assessing the difficulties that stakeholders may encounter within the school setting and also reveal the complexities of externalizing resources outside of the school. The role and impact of school boards are pertinent to developing strategies and models which are consistent with changing societal dynamics and demands amongst special needs stakeholders. Strategies of implementation and accountability are similar within the Ontario philosophy for special education:

The school board's special education plan must outline in detail the board's general philosophy and service-delivery model for the provision of special education programs and services. The board's special education plan must be designed to comply with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Ontario Human Rights Code, the Education Act and regulations made under the act, and any other relevant legislation. The board must include a statement in the plan confirming that the plan has been designed in accordance with this requirement.(Ontario Ministry of Education 2000, 5)

Although this plan is dated for 2000 there is no empirical data which speaks to whether its implementation has been successful allowing for a need of the research outlined by the Principal Researcher on this project as necessary and a means to compliment any board strategies for improving the status quo.

The literature that has dominated the discourse on special needs services speaks directly to integrative models for inclusion in the classroom setting. An overwhelming argument for such practices has lead to strategies of integration which have become common throughout most global educational systems.(Anonymous 2006, Attfield, Williams 2003, Crawford, Tindal 2006, Forlin, Hopewell 2006, Kosobud 2006, Lindsay et al. 2005, Mitchell 2001, Avramidis, Norwich 2002) The importance of this mandate is to allow the students who require special needs services to accumulate the capacity to enhance their social development skills with other "mainstream" students. The argument

of separating students with special needs from those who do not require the services is still prevalent in literature but has been recognized as a divisive strategy when examining issues around the models of placement into special needs programs when factoring in the relevant issues of diversity such as race, culture, ethnicity, and language to name a few. The case of international support for integration and inclusion is specified in the Cuban educational discourse:

Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all: moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system (Gasparini 2000, 16)

However there still remains a need to examine specific student's needs on a case by case basis. The argument is that some needs are beyond the capacity of teachers to engage the student in a manner respectful of their needs and that of their student peers:

...teachers, although positive towards the general philosophy of inclusive education, do not share a 'total inclusion' approach to special educational provision. Instead, they hold differing attitudes about school placements, based largely upon the nature of the students' disabilities. Teachers are more willing to include students with mild disabilities or physical/sensory impairments than students with more complex needs. In particular, there is enough evidence to suggest that, in the case of the more severe learning needs and behavioural difficulties, teachers hold negative attitudes to the implementation of inclusion. (Avramidis, Norwich 2002)

The debate of inclusion provides the opportunity to examine the current practices of teachers in Ontario and how they have engaged with the debate. Concrete research can outline whether strategies employed by board employees and external agencies have led to a more inclusive setting and take into account an assessment of services through the research purpose.

An example of the Educational Psychologist (EP) reveals that their presence is relevant within the school setting to provide the varying needs of the student population. Close access to such resources can prove vital to students both with special needs and those without who encounter crisis at optimal periods throughout the schooling year. Aston and Roberts examined the EP role in the United Kingdom and concluded through their surveys that:

According to the respondents in this study, there are particular and discrete tasks that only EPs can do, such as writing psychological advice for statutory assessment, and using closed tests. The EP team also reported in this study that they feel their approach, attitude and perspective is different from that of other agencies. (Ashton, Roberts 2006, 120)

Ashton and Roberts also left open the possibility and need for further examination of such roles when stating:

...it would be helpful to elicit perceptions of the EP role from other school types (for example, nursery, secondary and special schools). This information could help the EP team to tailor its services, and perhaps its 'marketing' activities, for the type of school the EP was working in...Asking classroom teachers or head teachers what they value from the EP may well yield different results as they have different experiences and expectations.(Ashton, Roberts 2006, 121)

By studying the current practices with regard to service providers the research can lead to innovative policies, strategies and practices that can be implemented across Ontario school boards. With one of the recommendation in the *Special Education Transformation* document under Professional Development being the "Increased capacity of all staff to educate a wider range of learners" illustrates an innovative strategy to which many teachers are currently engaged. Again, the case of BC and Ontario illustrate that service providers are involved in a vast amount of practices which are inclusive to special needs students. The tools required for professional development pertain to the governments and school boards allocation of funding, and the additional training requirements to which board staff currently are involved. The case of Alberta illustrates additional recommendations that state:

Recommendation 11.4 (Support for school counselling services)

That Alberta Learning, in consultation with teachers and other stakeholders, establish/confirm standards governing the provision of counselling services within public schools and that funding for school boards be adjusted to ensure adequate support for achieving.(Alberta Teachers' Association 2002, 50)

The literature on funding special needs services in schools illustrates the need for accountability by school boards in the allocation of funds. There are prevalent discrepancies that exist between rural and urban boards, where the latter has more access to resources for special needs services. Most of which are provided in the school setting by board staff. Within the rural areas boards are limited in how funding is appropriated for services thereby not being able to comply with equivalent standards of the urban boards. Various school boards have optimally decided to shift the responsibility onto external agencies to provide the services that board staff had previously been responsible for. The literature available does not deem whether this is a success or a failure. But the practical experiences of boards that reinstitute practices of rendering the special needs services by their staff has become a central opportunity to investigate what the complications were with external agencies in providing the services, if any existed at all.

The literature on evaluation focuses more specifically on the benefits and outcomes of the end user, primarily the students involved, and the implementation of various educational policy strategies that promote a basic understanding of special needs services.(Broderick 2006, Hamston, Risko & Ellis 2006, Jordan 2001, Kosobud 2006, Mitchell 2001, Bennett 2006, Rhim, McLaughlin 2001, Sartawi, Alghazo 2006, Vallecorsa 1992, Wang, Reynolds 1996, Ysseldyke 2000) There is no sufficient literature which assesses the role of the provider to the extent that can determine who the best provider of special needs services are. This raises interesting dynamics in the relationship of the providers to special education and whether the role of the services could be better situated if an evaluative component were involve. This could lead to the accountability

factor that stakeholders are seeking and furthermore address specific funding decisions as to how services and programs are funded. Evaluation is a necessary component of accountability for providing Special Education services to ensure the end user stakeholders are entering and leaving a viable system which can provide diverse results.

Conclusion

The summary of the literature pertaining to the research topic is minimal. What has been discussed in this review is the role that an extensive research project can undertake in addressing the questions which circulate around the role of best practices and who should provide the special needs services in Ontario. With the diverse communities that are impacted by educational services across Ontario more research needs to be conducted in order to provide the measures for accountability that the stakeholders involved are looking for. Accountability can not be solely associated with funding requirements. It should be inclusive to design, development and implementation of practices which benefit the public interest within public education. Therefore advancing the direction of the research question can provide a formidable and ground breaking to create innovative strategies for special needs services. This research has not yet been conducted and provides an opportunity for the Principal researcher and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation to discover what is occurring from the service provider perspective within special needs services.

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