Special Education:
CLASS COMPOSITION, INCLUSION AND TEACHING
IN TODAY’S CLASSROOMS

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Confronting Classroom Realities:
Student Diversity and Class Composition
A high school teacher might begin her day with a class of 37 students. Four of these students have learning disabilities, five have just moved to Alberta for the booming economy, one has serious behaviour issues, three are repeating the course from last year, seven are below grade level, two arrive late to class on a regular basis, and one is not attending class at all due to instability in his home life. This is just the first of several large classes she will teach this day.

Confronting the Challenge of Class Composition
(Froese-Germain, Riel, McGahey, Canadian Teacher’s Federation, Perspectives 2012)

A View from the Classroom

• Does an overcrowded, extraordinarily diverse high school class of 37 students set the stage for a constructive and rewarding learning environment for our students?

• How frequently might positive teacher-student interactions occur?

• To what extent could a strong sense of belonging and community among students be created in this classroom?

• How often would teachers be willing to risk using innovative practices in such a challenging context?

These critical questions go beyond class size and confront the challenge posed by the sheer diversity of student needs to in the classroom, known as “class composition.”
For teachers, both *class size* and *diversity* matter.

Most Special Education researchers concur that “smaller classes have the greatest positive impact on students with the greatest educational needs.” (OISE-UT/CEA, 2010)

Today teachers try to adapt their teaching to address the individual needs of the learners in their regular classrooms.

As the classroom becomes larger and more diverse, this task becomes increasingly more onerous.

Class size and composition also have obvious implications for inclusive education.

The success of “Inclusion” is, in large measure, determined by the extent to which teachers have the necessary supports and services to be able to effectively integrate students with special educational needs into their classrooms and schools.
The Class Size Debate: The Problem of Countervailing Policies

Class size reductions from K to 3 and possibly beyond can produce student achievement gains (CCL 2005), provided that the total context is conducive to such improvement.

Three critical factors have been identified:

1. Complementary policies and practice supporting higher student achievement (i.e., raised expectations, positive discipline, regular assessment, teacher PD);

2. Contradictory policies and practice that undermines the potential benefit of class size reductions (i.e., full inclusion, social promotion, student competencies gap, language challenges);

3. Rising class sizes at higher grade levels – from grades 7 to 12 (i.e., removal of class size caps, integration of learning disabilities and ELL students).

(Michel and Rothstein 2002; CCL 2005; and Froese-Germain, Riel, McGahey, 2012)
## Public School Indicators: Student Enrolment and Class Size

### Canadian Provincial School Systems, 2001-2011


### Table 5.3: Selected Public School Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>K-12 school enrolment</th>
<th>Number of educators*</th>
<th>Student-educator ratio</th>
<th>Spending per pupil** ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2001-02</strong></td>
<td><strong>2010-11</strong></td>
<td><strong>Change (%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>2001-02</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newfoundland and Labrador</td>
<td>84,236</td>
<td>66,288</td>
<td>-21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maritimes</td>
<td>299,175</td>
<td>253,714</td>
<td>-15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>1,088,869</td>
<td>979,563</td>
<td>-10.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>3,046,333</td>
<td>1,953,624</td>
<td>-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prairie provinces</td>
<td>879,257</td>
<td>883,385</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Columbia</td>
<td>605,049</td>
<td>550,038</td>
<td>-9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>5,935,949</td>
<td>4,708,548</td>
<td>-26.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Full-time equivalent basis. Includes teachers, school administrators, and pedagogical support.

**Public elementary and secondary spending only for all provinces except Newfoundland and Labrador and the Maritimes, where total (public and private) expenditures are used. Given the small size of private school systems in Atlantic Canada, disaggregated data are not available (except for New Brunswick) due to confidentiality requirements.
Recent Research:  
*Teacher Voice on Teaching and Learning Project*  
(CTF National Teacher Survey, 2012)

**Background and Context**

In the Spring of 2011, the Canadian Teacher’s Federation (CTF) conducted a national teacher survey on the theme of *The Teacher Voice on Teaching and Learning* to seek input from across Canada on teacher concerns.

The CTF survey provided a snapshot of what class size and composition looked like across the country,

The national survey secured responses from nearly 3,800 teachers representing 9,894 classes in English and French schools. The sample teacher pool was drawn from 12 participating CTF member organizations.

**Average Class Sizes**

Average class size was 21.3 students, ranging from 22.1 students for grades 4-8 to 19 students for junior kindergarten or kindergarten (JK-K).

English schools (including French Immersion) had an average class size of nearly 22 students, while French as a first language schools had a slightly smaller average class size of just over 19 students.
Recent Research:  
*Teacher Voice on Teaching and Learning Project*  
(CTF National Teacher Survey, 2012)

Class Size by Grade Level

- Over a third of the classes for all grade levels combined contained 25 students or more (8.3% contained 30 students or more).
- for grades 4-8, nearly 39% of classes contained 25 students or more (6.5% contained 30 or more).
- for grades 9 and over, 40.3% of classes contained 25 students or more (13.5% – over 1 in 7 classrooms – contained 30 or more students).
- for grades 1-3, just over 14% of classes contained 25 students or more
- for JK-K, nearly 12% of classes contained 25 students or more
Recent Research:  
**Teacher Voice on Teaching and Learning Project**  
(CTF National Teacher Survey, 2012)

**Average Number of Special Needs Students**

- Students with identified exceptionalities (i.e., designated behavioural problems or mental or physical disabilities, as well as other special needs students including gifted students); and English Language Learners and French Language Learners (defined as students whose first language differs from the school’s primary language of instruction, and requiring supports).

- The average number of students with identified exceptionalities per class was 3.5, ranging from 3.8 students for grades 4-8 to 1.9 students for junior kindergarten/kindergarten.
Recent Research:  
*Teacher Voice on Teaching and Learning Project*  
(CTF National Teacher Survey, 2012)

Class Composition – Grade 4 and Over

- Students with identified exceptionalities accounted for 16.3% of total students in the surveyed classrooms, ranging from respective shares of 17.1% for grades 4-8 to 10% of students for junior kindergarten/kindergarten.

- Of classes surveyed, over 81% have at least one student with formally identified exceptionalities, and 27.7% contain 5 or more students with identified exceptionalities.

- In grades 4 and over, not only were class sizes generally larger but almost 1 in 3 (30.6%) classes contained 5 or more students with identified exceptionalities.
Students with Language Learning Challenges

- The average number of English Language Learners and French Language Learners (ELL/FLL students) per class was 2.6. The prevalence was higher the lower the grade, ranging from 4.7 students for junior kindergarten/kindergarten to 1.7 students for grades 9 and over.

- ELL/FLL students accounted for an average 12.2% of total students in the classroom, ranging from respective shares of 24.7% for junior kindergarten / kindergarten to 8.2% for grades 9 and over.
Recent Research: CTF National Teacher Survey (2012)

Summary Conclusions

• *Class size matters, but so does class composition* and – if we are serious about serving all students – *both* need to be addressed together.

• Contemporary Canadian schools are populated by many different types of students with diverse and complex needs and learning challenges.

• The CTF survey looked at students “identified” as Special Needs, but did not include students who were undiagnosed or those with other glaring needs such as students from low-income families (with poverty-related issues of hunger, illness, instability), students with mental health problems, or immigrant and refugee students.
Case Study:
Inclusive Education in New Brunswick

New Brunswick receives international award for inclusive education
10 February 2016

FREDERICTON (GNB) – The provincial government has received an international award for the development and implementation of Policy 322, which entrenches inclusion as an official component of the province’s education system.

Presented in Vienna, Austria, as part of the Zero Project 2016, the award recognizes New Brunswick’s ongoing commitment to inclusive education and the implementation of the new provincial policy in 2013.

“We were selected for this international award from among 200 nominations from 76 different countries,” Education and Early Childhood Development Minister Serge Rousselle said. “It is an example of how a small province can accomplish great things, including supporting diversity and respect in education. The efforts of so many New Brunswickers can now serve as a model for other public school systems around the world.”

“Canada’s province of New Brunswick adopted a legally-binding policy on Inclusive Education in 2013, setting out clear and easy to follow requirements for all public schools, installing education support teams, and defining Personalized Learning Plans. It forbids segregated settings and targets all children, not only those with disabilities.”

Our mission is working for a world with zero barriers. Worldwide, the Zero Project finds and shares models that improve the daily lives and legal rights of all persons with disabilities.
Case Study: Inclusive Education in New Brunswick

New Brunswick’s Full Inclusion Policy 2012 to the Present

Initial Announcement

“Inclusion within the regular classroom is and should be the starting point for all children – and students and teachers must have the appropriate support to succeed within the regular setting. But an inclusive education system recognizes the need for flexibility, engagement and outside the box thinking. “


Minister of Education Jody Carr grabbed all the headlines with his June 5, 2012 announcement that New Brunswick was reversing its cost cutting course and spending $62 million more over the next three years on implementing inclusive education.
Over the past five years, it has become increasingly clear that the regular classroom is not the most enabling learning environment for all students, especially those with severe learning disabilities or complex needs.

One in ten Canadians reportedly suffers from some kind of learning disability and between 2% and 4% of New Brunswick’s public school students, numbering from 2,100 to 4,200, are struggling at school with serious learning challenges. Some 1,238 of New Brunswick’s 74,579 Anglophone public school students have now been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and many already require significant learning supports. (NB EECD, 2012).

Rescuing and properly educating special needs kids with severe learning disabilities and autism is proving a significant challenge in the province’s regular Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools.
Fast Forward:
NBTA says “Positive Learning Environment” Compromised,
CBC News, March 2016

The New Brunswick Teachers' Association (NBTA) sent a March 3, 2016 letter to Education Minister Serge Rousselle asking for an immediate review of the government's inclusion policy.

Guy Arseneault, the NBTA president, said in a statement that although teachers support inclusion, "issues such as a lack of clarity, inconsistent application and conflict with other policies make it increasingly difficult to meet the collective needs of ALL students."

NBTA claims teachers donning Kevlar clothing in classrooms

NBTA's Guy Arseneault says 'frequency and severity' of violence teachers face in classrooms is unacceptable

"Some teachers have to wear Kevlar because of the biting that is going on with students and some of the kicking and punching....
We feel that students are entitled and have a right to be in the classrooms but it should not be in the detriment of others."
(Guy Arseneault, NBTA)
Fredericton lawyer Harold Doherty says the present system of inclusion in New Brunswick classrooms is failing all involved.

CBC News, March 6, 2016

Autism activist Harold Doherty supports the New Brunswick Teachers' Association’s appeal

Doherty, who has a 20-year-old son, Connor, with severe autism, intellectual disability and epilepsy, has been involved since 2006 in three reviews of the inclusion program in New Brunswick.

He says it's wrong to think one program works for every student.

"It's a huge mistake because there's no attempt whatsoever to look at what works for each child what does the evidence tell us," he said.

"If you look at a medical condition like a physical medical condition, you wouldn’t just assume that there was one solution for everything and yet that’s the approach we take to this educational philosophy that requires us to interact with kids with very complex conditions."
Case Study:
Class Composition in British Columbia

Canada’s Top Ranked School System

British Columbia is the top-performing province, ranking third overall, behind Japan and Finland. B.C. earns an “A+” on high-school attainment, doing better than the top-ranked international peer on this indicator, the United States. Given that high-school attainment is a necessary precursor to post-secondary education, it is not surprising that the province is a strong performer on college attainment (“A”) and university attainment (“B”). B.C. also performs well on student skills, scoring an “A+” for its low share of students with inadequate reading, and “A”s for its low shares of students with inadequate math and science skills and for its large share of students with high-level science skills. (Conference Board of Canada, 2014)

Backgrounder:
Class Size and Composition

In 2002 the provincial government passed legislation that removed all learning conditions, including all class size and class composition limits, from the collective agreements. In addition, the legislation removed all guarantees of services provided by specialist teachers such as librarians, counsellors, learning assistance and ESL teachers. All guaranteed supports for special needs students were also removed.

Currently, section 76.1 of the BC School Act restricts kindergarten classes to 22 students and primary classes to 24. For most grades 4-12 classes there is a guideline of a maximum of 30 students, but the guideline can be exceeded if the principal and superintendent agree that a larger number of students is acceptable. For classes such as music, drama, Planning 10, alternate programs, and leadership classes there are no guidelines and no maximums. (BCTF, 2016)
Class Struggle:
The “Class Composition” Problem, 2002-2016

BCTF Labour Actions and Strike, 2014

The Thorny Issue

Class Size is easy for parents to understand and administrators to define. Composition is a thornier issue, but it emerged as a major bone of contention in the 2014 BC Teachers Strike.

“I think it’s fantastic that there are classrooms with such diverse needs and there are benefits to that but with things being stripped back and stripped back, it gets harder for teachers to meet the needs of every child in the classroom,” BC Special education teacher Regan Rankin said.

“You can have a class of 29 with one ESL student and maybe three students with special needs. Compare that to a class with 26 students with four ESL students and five students with special needs. The workload shifts significantly and becomes more difficult to meet the needs of all kids,” claimed BCTF spokesperson Richard Overgaard.

Since 2006-2007, the number of classes with four or more children with special needs has risen sharply, from 9,559 to 16,163 in this school year.

“Size is not the determinant of outcomes. Composition has a role to play in that as does the quality of our teachers and teaching instruction,” claimed Education Minister Peter Fassbender.

(Global News BC, August 31, 2014)
Classroom Teachers Speak Out, BC 2014

Class Composition: It’s Worse Than You Think

“In two of my classes last year I had 18 special ed students in a class of 30, with limited amount of support,” said Tammy Prince, a Burnaby Home Economics teacher.

“Kids got boiling water poured on them. Kids got cut. It’s really hard to supervise that many children by yourself, or even with EA support, when there’s that many differences and levels in one class,” she told the Vancouver Observer.

“There, students are no longer separated into mainstream and special needs classes. With the exception of some students with disabilities that will prohibit them graduating with a high school diploma, all students are in one big group, Ashley D. Mackenzie wrote in the Vancouver Sun.

That means that I get to teach students on the Autism spectrum. Deaf students. Dyslexic students. It means that I get to teach students who have difficulty understanding written and verbal communication, or putting their own thoughts into writing or speech. That I get to teach students with mental health concerns. And students who self-harm, or harm others.

And they’re amazing kids.

But I never dreamed I would have nearly non-verbal autistic students in an academic course without the support of an Education Assistant. I didn’t consider having to re-teach every single lesson to students with comprehension difficulties – two minutes after having just taught it to the class. I didn’t think about how I would approach the student who was carving into their skin with a pin during class, nor did I wonder what I’d do when I found out that a student had previously threatened teachers with violence – twice.”

The Vancouver Sun, September 6, 2014.

Some 57,000 B.C. students are identified with special needs, according the Education Ministry. That’s 10 per cent of all 550,000 public school students.
Class size and class composition in B.C. public schools is getting slightly more challenging, despite a five-week strike by teachers in 2014 that ended with a $400-million fund to address class size and composition and hire more specialist teachers. But those hires seem to have merely replaced teachers who were laid off as cash-strapped school boards struggle to balance budgets that haven’t risen to cover increasing costs such as MSP premiums and BC Hydro bills. To balance their budgets, sometimes districts opt to make classes slightly bigger.

The Education Fund was used to:
• Hire 312 full-time teachers, 849 part-time teachers, and more than 400 support staff,
• Increase the hours of part-time teachers and support staff.

"Two years ago, Premier Christy Clark said improving class composition was her No. 1 priority, but her continued underfunding of education has actually made things worse," said B.C. Teachers Federation president Jim Iker. "Teachers had hoped the premier was sincere, but these new numbers show she hasn’t lived up to her words."

*The Vancouver Sun, February 15, 2016.*
Class Size and Composition, BC, 2015-2016

**Average Class Sizes:** Virtually unchanged from 2014-15
Average 19.7 students for kindergarten, 21.8 for Grades 1-3, 26 for Grades 4-7, and 23.4 for Grades 8 to 12.

**Classes with Over 30 students:** Up to 1,343 from 1,077 in 2014-15. Most of the classes with more than 30 students are over the 30-student limit to accommodate student course choices in Gr. 11 and 12.

**Classes with Four or More Special Needs Students:** Up to 16,516 classes from 16,156 in 2014-15. One in every four classes in the province has four or more students with special needs.

**Classes with Seven or More Special Needs Students:** Up to 4,163 classes from 3,895 in 2014-15 and the highest ever in B.C.

**Classes with Seven or more ELL Students:** Up to 4,840 classes from 4,416 in 2014-15.

Before 2012, the number of special needs students that could be in a class was capped at three.
Epilogue:
Why Class Composition Matters

The Real Life Classroom

Class Size based upon Student-Teacher Ratios has long been accepted and used in staffing schools, but its utility is now being questioned by frontline teachers.

Student diversity, driven by “Inclusion” and the growing numbers of severely learning-challenged and disadvantaged kids is the new normal. The rise of “Coddled Kids” and “Helicopter Parents” has compounded the challenges.

Tackling Class Composition is emerging as the top priority in teacher-led school reform.