

Resisting the Atomization of the Student: Unpacking Ontario's Individual Education Plan for a Holistic Engagement of Disability

Olivia DiGiammarino

E-mail: olivia.digiammarino@mail.utoronto.ca

Received December 2025

Accepted for publication December 2025

Published May 2026

Abstract

This paper will express the current landscape of Ontario Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) as legal documents that outline the specific educational needs and academic, environmental and instructional accommodations for students with disabilities and exceptionalities. While this process centers the rights of the student from a legal perspective and can protect them from the discrimination, this paper will offer that Individual Education Plans are a product of a chronic institutional desire to pathologize and remediate disabled students; atomizing their agency as learners and identity as members of society. The application of Holistic Curriculum (Miller, 2019) will support a re-imagining of disability in education calling for advocates and educators alike to resist an overt Medical Model of disability that is plaguing Canada's education system today.

Keywords: *disability, special education, critical disability, students with disabilities, curriculum, law*

Introduction

Historically, education in Canada has been defined by colonial and ableist norms of knowledge production. Hinged on a Eurocentric value system of folding students into the white hegemony, as settlers colonize(d)¹ Canada (Morris et al, 2023). Canada's history of formal schooling preceded confederation, and during and

post-confederation, curriculum became an impetus to solidify national identity and ideals of "civic duty" (Gresco, 1986). Disability was not factored into this ideal, and while disability existed, the aim of education quickly moved to remediate deviants thought to be 'curable' or to forcibly exile them (Parekh, 2022). Thus, the practice of the institutionalization of disabled people has been normalized, and the current state of Special Education in Canada has not totally divorced these colonial and ableist roots (Morris et al, 2023). In Ontario, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are legal documents that outline the specific educational needs and academic,

¹ Both the past and present tense of colonization are used in this sentence to offer the position that while the form and modality of colonization has changed over-time, the Canadian education system continues to endure processes of colonization that include but are not limited to ableist practices and systematic segregation of students, teachers and knowledge systems.

environmental, and instructional accommodations for students with disabilities and exceptionalities. While this process centers the rights of the student from a legal perspective and can protect them from discrimination, this paper will argue that Individual Education Plans are a product of a chronic institutional desire to pathologize and remediate disabled students, atomizing their agency as learners and identity as members of society. The application of *Holistic Curriculum* (Miller, 1988) will support a re-imagining of disability in education, calling for advocates and educators alike to resist an overt Medical Model of disability that is plaguing Canada's education system today. Should educators choose this applied framework, we might imagine systems of education to change holistically themselves. With an emphasis on not remediation, this paper will consider the pedagogical posture of such an educator and consider that individual resistance may be necessary in the activism needed to name and dismantle ableism in elementary education.

Special Education in Ontario and Atomization of the Student

The Medical Model of disability is one that centers the impairment, deficit or exceptionality of the *body-mind* (Clare, 2017) and its relationship to a non-disabled world (Oliver, 1999). It is through this understanding that certain parts, elements or systems of the body-mind can be cured to achieve as close to a non-disabled state as possible. The paradigm of the Medical Model perpetuates an understanding that to be disabled is to be less-than a non-disabled person in societal value. Therefore, propensity to measure and quantify function and ability of a person's body-mind is done so to uphold a norm of non-disability. A secondary tenant of this paradigm is that disabled people desire to be non-disabled. This monolithic understanding of disability that values non-disability makes the process of 'cure' by non-disabled people,

institutions or (medical) intervention a typical underpinning and expectation of the disabled experience.

In Ontario, the Education Act (1990) outlines the parameters for students' right to receive an education and the terms under which that education is delivered. According to the Act, "The purpose of education is to provide students with the opportunity to realize their potential and develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, caring citizens who contribute to their society." (2009, c. 25, s. 1). This citizenship rhetoric identifies the nature of the institution of education which benefits from the compartmentalization of a student by skill and capacity for civic engagement.

The Act (1990) provides definitions of roles and responsibilities within a school. With respect to disabled students, it can be read as an attempt to categorize and evaluate students by need, thereby communicating an education system that is interested in the atomization of students. The proclivity and capacity for which a student can "contribute to their society" is not identified by the nature of existence or personhood but earned by achieving the status of a "highly skilled, knowledgeable and caring citizen". Throughout The Act, the term "Exceptional Pupil" is used to define "a pupil whose behavioral, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is considered to need placement in a special education program by a committee" (Education Act, 1990, s. 1.1).

In *Ableism in Education: Rethinking School Practices and Policies* (Parekh, 2022) addresses how enmeshed the Medical Model and Special Education are, "Special education is historically steeped in medicalized notions of ability, exemplified by special education identifications (formal/ informal), prescriptive plans for remedy

(IEPs), and treatment offered through supports” (p. 60). Effectively, the Individual Education Plan identifies and names the child’s disability, which explains the deficit of their academic achievement based on non-disabled standards of academic performance. A secondary consideration of the relationship between the teacher, the student, and the IEP is that the document itself provides a veil of legal protection against discrimination. Teachers, administrators, or school boards who fail to properly provide accommodations or a modified curriculum can face punitive actions, including, but not limited to, Human Rights complaints. However, a point of tension should not be taken to mean that it prevents covert forms of discrimination or the presence of attitudinal or structural barriers. An IEP may also be the cause of discriminatory practices or biases held against a student, as it discloses non-disability status. Therefore, the legal nature of an IEP does not beget acceptance or accountability of an inclusive environment but continues to apply a prescriptively ableist education delivered based on the identified deficit of the student.

Beyond legality, the IEP has been conceptualized as a communication device used to inform educators on best practices based on student ‘need’, with the concepts of inclusion and equity in mind. Ultimately, “needs” for accommodations (instructional, environmental, or assessment) or modifications to the curriculum are scaffolded based on non-disabled norms of performance. What remains is the praxis of returning to the non-disabled student as the norm and standard. In such, a persistent inability to imagine inclusion of difference without pathology, revealing a disheartening yet palpable legacy of ableism that accompanies the IEP. Therefore, in Ontario, the form and function of the IEP is but a method by which students’ abilities, both physical and intellectual, are compartmentalized to validate formal segregation of students and ultimately normalizes the atomization of the student.

It should be stated that not every teacher in Ontario adopts an ableist view of disabled students. There are teacher-advocates and disability activists in many schools across the province and country. However, the commentary here is that ableism is a cultural norm in Ontario schools, bolstered by the use and proliferation of Individualized Education Plans for students that fail to meet non-disabled standards of being or academic performance. To resist this cultural norm is not typical and may be based on several mitigating factors including but not limited to: personal proximity to disability, personal belief systems, adoption of holistic pedagogy, professional development, teacher training and continued education.

Towards a Holistic Vision of Disabled Education

In *Holistic Curriculum* (1988), we can understand the inverse of holistic education as the atomization of the student: “Individualism has promoted fragmentation, as there is little attempt to define the common good, much less work towards such a goal” (Miller, p.52). The relationship between individualism and the fragmentation of the student, or atomization via IEP, is that it allows for the “common good” to remain ambiguous. The “common good” presents romantically as the inclusion and opportunity to provide greater care for students with disabilities. However, there is an argument to be made that the “common good” that is upheld by the practice of atomization of students via the IEP, is the maintenance of non-disability as a standard of personhood. Therefore, the IEP functions as a device intended to signal deficit in value of the disabled student.

If we consider a simple tenant of a seminal text of holistic pedagogy, *Holistic Curriculum* (1988) we can begin to envision how moving away from Individual Education Plans would highlight the

systemic desire to remediate or exile disability from the Ontario education system. Miller (1988) writes,

In contrast, a holistic perspective can provide a broader and more inspiring approach to accountability. From this perspective, the person, or student, is viewed as a whole human being who both thinks and feels and whose physical being should also be honoured. I believe that this perspective means that first of all, we are accountable to the whole student who sits or stands before us. He or she is not to be viewed as someone who simply “performs” a narrow set of Skills. (p. 210).

The view of the whole human being disrupts the current inclination to atomize and pathologize students. How do we begin to imagine an education system that is accountable to the whole human being? All persons should be afforded compassion, understanding and patience that those in defense of the IEP might say it elicits. Miller (1988) ultimately calls for a radical shift in the education system to value the whole student who ‘sits or stands’ before us. The accountability that Miller (1988) calls for does not imply a deficit of the student, which the IEP confirms and identifies. It is starkly divorced from the common desire to diagnose, pathologize, intervene, or correct disability, and we can then consider how educators might find themselves unsure of their goal should they dare to receive students as a *whole people*. In *Rethinking the Individualized Education Plan Process: voices from the other side of the table*, MacLeod et al., (2017) consider the precarious process of developing the IEP and the vulnerabilities experienced by parents/caregivers and students at the behest of teachers and educational institutions. They also write, “Many parents echoed this concern that educators need to look beyond the medicalized remediation model of special education and focus

on the child as a whole person...” (p. 393). The article suggests ways to amend the process of IEP creation including greater communication and transparency in process and collaboration between parents and educators. The authors do not suggest the abolition of the IEP, arguing that with family involvement, the IEP has “proven effective increase in achievement for students with and without disabilities” (p 397). Even this scholarly work that moves to push boundaries on the process of IEP creation, does not push far enough to consider the ableist parameters of ‘achievement’ as to justify continuous structures of discrimination and attitudinal bias.

Therefore, moving away from the IEP must be part of the resistance. In considering personal pedagogical postures, what may prove more useful for working educators is a practical approach to the concern of primarily and indiscriminately meeting student’s needs. It is then that we can consider Universal Design for Learning as part of the solution. In *Universal Design for Learning in the Classroom: Practical Applications for K-12 and Beyond*, Hall (2024) presents a landscape for which Universal Design for Learning answers the call of Miller’s (1988) *Holistic Curriculum*,

In 2012, UDL was also seen primarily as a special education strategy. Though its creators always intended for UDL to span general and special education— thus bridging the gap in academic rigor and accessibility between the two— the field drew most of its interest, energy, ideas, and funding from special education or, at the collegiate level, from disability offices. Today, UDL is widely accepted in practice, research, and policy as an effective approach to learning design. (p. XV)

The natural inclusion of disability as inevitable student diversity or variance resists the need for overt medicalization and pathology of the student, and maintains a wholeness of their personhood. UDL identifies a more “holistic” approach with respect to engaging such “learner variability” to maximize equitable learning experiences for all students. Hall (2024) writes,

“A core idea driving UDL is a commitment to being clear on learning goals and flexible in the means available for progressing toward and reaching those goals. This flexibility appears in the form of options that (1) reduce barriers to learning and (2) consider learner variability.” (p.2).

The term ‘goal’ here is operative of curriculum standards, not the systemic desire to cure or eradicate disability but to progress in communal knowledge building with an appreciation and expectation of learner variability.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a pedagogical application to Miller’s *Holistic Curriculum* (1988) addresses a need to manipulate the academic curriculum and teaching approaches as opposed to the student. A UDL approach might be useful for teachers that wish to be accountable to the whole student and who want to reject the atomization of the student. The limitations of Universal Design for Learning and that of *Holistic Curriculum* (1988) is that it requires an accountability of the teacher, their knowledge, application and delivery of such practices, that is considerably counter-cultural to the current landscape of education in Ontario. Systems and historical practices, particularly those that remain unquestioned for generations, require many advocates and activists to resist a deficit model of disability and to be accountable for the current practices that uphold such norms like the IEP.

Educators may consider critical disability discourses, decolonial frameworks or other allied social-justice movements to consider how scholars and educators are working towards more just education systems not just practices. Educators must be accountable to their participation in an ableist system and question whether they have an authentic desire to teach any or all students. In *Hope and Healing in Urban Education*, Shawn Ginwright (2016) offers *Radical Healing* as an approach to cultivating a socially just education. Ginwright (2016) writes,

The healing justice framework requires that we conceptualize oppression as a form of social and collective trauma. This view of oppression allows us to identify and name the cultural, social, and spiritual consequences of trauma for oppressed communities. Trauma conveys the idea that oppression and injustice inflict collective harm. Effectively responding to oppression, therefore, requires a process that restores individuals and communities to a state of well-being (p 9).

If we want to consider how we might engage with students holistically, viewing them as a whole person we also need to contend with how education itself is fractured and atomized and in need of radical healing just as the individuals who have experienced oppression from within the fractured system itself. As we idealize a future that is more socially just and responsive to those who have been made most vulnerable to the original institution, we can begin to question the norms and intentions held by individuals and the collective that uphold what must be resisted against.

Final Considerations

Further research is required to understand the extent to which teachers actively and passively discriminate against students with Individualized

Education Plans. This could work practically as a survey of Ontario Certified Teachers, although many would not necessarily disclose discriminatory beliefs. Discrimination can operate in ways that are implied, illusive, and would require more skillful documentation. A secondary call for data collection with respect to the number of Individualized Education Plans that are in use over the last 10 years, the type, variety, and demographic of the student would also be revealing. While questions remain, regarding the best ways to integrate the unique needs of all students, the Individual Education Plan is certainly not always the answer. Teachers, particularly those in roles of ‘Special Education’, are encouraged to champion the inclusion and equitable education of all students and resist the structures that isolate and atomize students for the use and benefit of an ableist system of reformation as education.

This paper has considered the utility of the Individualized Education Plan as a tool of ableist education norms and ideals. The categorization and atomization of the student maintains a deficit model with respect to impairment and disability and negates the value of disabled students as whole people and as part of natural student diversity and variance. The IEP provides a proscriptive approach to inclusion of disability as deficits that can be managed, mitigated, cured or segregated. By considering a basic value system of *Holistic Curriculum* (1988), that presents the teacher with the accountability toward each student as they are, may demystify the cultural ableist architecture in Ontario schools. Teachers are encouraged to question the use of pathology via IEP and how the persistent inclination to atomize the student is precisely what is plaguing classrooms today, not disability itself.

References

- Hall, T. E., Robinson, K. H., & Gordon, D. (Eds.). (2024). *Universal design for learning in the classroom: Practical applications for k-12 and beyond*. Guilford Publications.
- Kate MacLeod, Julie N. Causton, Mary Radel & Patrick Radel (2017) Rethinking the individualized education plan process: Voices from the other side of the table, *Disability & Society*, 32:3, 381-400, DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2017.1294048
- Ginwright, S. A. (2016). *Hope and healing in urban education : how urban activists and teachers are reclaiming matters of the heart* (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315757025>
- Gresco, J. (1986) Creating little dominions within the dominion: Early catholic indian schools in saskatchewan and british columbia In barman, J., Herbet, I, and McCaskill, D. (eds), *Indian Education in Canada: Volume 1: The Legacy*. UBC Press.
- Miller, J. P. (1988). *The holistic curriculum*. OISE Press.
- Morris, J., Couture, J.-C., & Phelan, A. M. (2023). Riding fences: Anticipatory governance, curriculum policy, and teacher subjectivity. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 46(3), 517+.
https://link-gale-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/apps/doc/A768824506/CIC?u=utoronto_main&sid=summon&xid=43b9b3db
- Ontario, Ministry of Education. (1990). *Education Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2. Queen's Printer for Ontario.
<https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90e0>
- Parekh, G. (2022). *Ableism in education: Rethinking school practices and policies*. Harvard Education Press.

Author Bio

Olivia DiGiammarino is a Special Education teacher and doctoral student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. With a MA in Critical Disability Studies (York University), Olivia is interested in co-creating inclusive learning experiences for disabled people, specifically children. Olivia thinks and writes about fatness, embodiment, Canadian Human Rights and disability. More of Olivia's work and research can be found at www.odigiammarino.com