FOCUS ON DIVERSITY IN ONTARIO: A SNAPSHOT OF THE TORONTO DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

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ABSTRACT The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is one of the largest school boards in North America and, arguably, the most diverse. In light of its unique ethno-cultural and socio-demographic make-up, the TDSB confronts complex and multi-layered challenges in negotiating existing power relations that emerge from interactions between the student population and the education system at large. In order to address issues of equity, particularly relating to academic achievement, access, and participation, the TDSB utilizes robust mechanisms for data collection and analyses. This article reviews one of the methods of data collection used by the TDSB, the Student and Parent Census, and discusses key trends that emerge from the data analyses.

This paper identifies and reviews achievement trends across gender, ethno-racial status, and students' primary language. In addition, analyses investigating the relationships between family income and special education are also explored. Variables such as family structure and parental education are also considered and analyzed across various achievement indicators. Each analysis demonstrates key issues in the actualization of education equity and raises questions as to how best address the evidenced achievement stratification. In conclusion, the embedded analyses aim to challenge and generate discussion among school, district, and community stakeholders to maximize the potential of the data collection tools and subsequent demographic analyses employed by the TDSB.

RESUME Le Toronto District School Board (TDSB) est l'un des plus grands conseils scolaires en Amérique du Nord et fort probablement le plus diversifié. Compte tenu de sa composition ethnoculturelle et sociodémographique unique, le TDSB est confronté à des défis complexes et multidimensionnels qui émergent lors de la négociation des relations de pouvoirs établies entre la population étudiante et le système éducatif dans son ensemble. Pour aborder ces questions d'équité, surtout celles relatives à la réussite scolaire, à l'accessibilité et à la participation, le TDSB utilise de solides mécanismes de cueillette et d'analyse des données. Ce texte examine l'une des méthodes de collecte de données utilisées par le TDSB, le recensement des élèves et des parents, et discute des principales tendances qui émergent de leur analyse.

Dans cet article, nous allons identifier et discuter des tendances qui existent relativement à la réussite selon le sexe, le statut ethnoracial et la langue maternelle des élèves. De plus, nous allons examiner les liens entre le revenu familial et l'éducation spécialisée. Des variables comme la structure familiale et le niveau d'éducation

des parents sont également prises en considération et examinées selon certains autres indicateurs de réussite. Chaque analyse illustre des enjeux pertinents à la mise en place de l'équité scolaire et soulève des questions relativement aux meilleurs moyens d'aborder la stratification qui existe selon la réussite au sein de nos écoles. En conclusion, les analyses visent à remettre en cause et à stimuler le dialogue entre les écoles, le conseil scolaire et les intervenants communautaires dans le but de pleinement exploiter le potentiel offert par les outils de collecte de données et les analyses démographiques subséquemment réalisée par le TDSB.

SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHICS IN TORONTO AND ONTARIO

With continued immigration and community development, Ontario is becoming increasingly diverse. According to the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF), Ontario represents close to 40% of Canada's total population. Of Canadians living in Ontario, 23% self-identify as a visible minority with the largest visible minority group being the South Asian community, followed closely by the Chinese community (OTF, 2008). Although Canada boasts of an open post-secondary education system (Kirby, 2009), close to 14% of Ontarians do not have a high school diploma, degree, or certificate (OTF, 2008).

While Ontario may be perceived as diverse, Toronto is often considered the epicentre of cultural and ethnic diversity across Canada. Toronto is home to myriad communities which are largely reflected across its public board of education, one of the largest public school boards in North America. As of 2013, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) accommodated over 254,000 regular day students and approximately 140,000 continuing education students taking non-formal courses, day-school, night-school, and summer school (internal TDSB enrolment figures). In light of its unique ethno-cultural and socio-demographic make-up, the TDSB confronts complex and multi-layered challenges in negotiating existing power relations that emerge from interactions between the student population and the education system at large. The TDSB has a history of investigating issues of equity and has established means through which to monitor and evaluate its interventions across both their elementary and secondary school panels.

One of the principal tools employed by the TDSB is the TDSB's Student and Parent Censuses, administered every five years. The Parent Census is completed by parents of students ranging from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 6. Following Grade 6, there are two Student Censuses (Forms A and B for each), one completed by students in Grades7-8 and another completed by students in Grades 9-12. The Student Census requests that students self-identify across various demographic categories including racial identity, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language spoken, family structure, income and other resource and access-related questions.

In addition, the Censuses ask students to respond to experiential queries around in-school experiences, inclusion, bullying, homework, paid work, home-life, extracurricular activities, honours and awards, as well as how well-developed students perceive their own skill sets to be. What is unique about the TDSB's Student and Parent Censuses is that, while they are confidential, they are not anonymous. Student identification numbers are used to correlate student information collected through the surveys to the TDSB's School Information Systems, which houses student program, achievement, and other student-related information. Conducting analyses on correlations involving student demographics, program opportunities, achievement, and academic outcomes allows the TDSB to closely monitor and develop interventions around issues of equity, access, and social justice.

Before providing a brief overview of current trends revealed within the TDSB's demographic data, it is important to first situate the TDSB within its provincial context. Comparing Ontario demographic information to that of the TDSB highlights Toronto's unique diversity.

Comparative to provincial demographic data, the TDSB is:

- More ethno-racially diverse. Whereas, the proportion of Ontarians who self-identify as White is 75.2%, this proportion drops to 29% for the TDSB. Among the student population at the TDSB, 24% self-identify as South Asian, 15% as East Asian, and 12% as Black (Statistics Canada 2010a, 2010b; TDSB, 2013)[1].

- Home to a greater proportion of first generation immigrants. The proportion of Ontarians of first generation status is 34%; whereas, 67% of students in the TDSB identify as first generation immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2007; TDSB, 2013).

- More linguistically diverse. Of Ontarians, 68.2% identify English as their primary language, while the same is true for only 44.8% of students in the TDSB. This may also explain the heightened proportion of English Language Learners (9%) in the TDSB compared to other school boards in the province (5%) (Statistics Canada, 2012; TDSB, 2013).

- On par with provincial trends in academic outcomes. In terms of the Ontario Secondary School

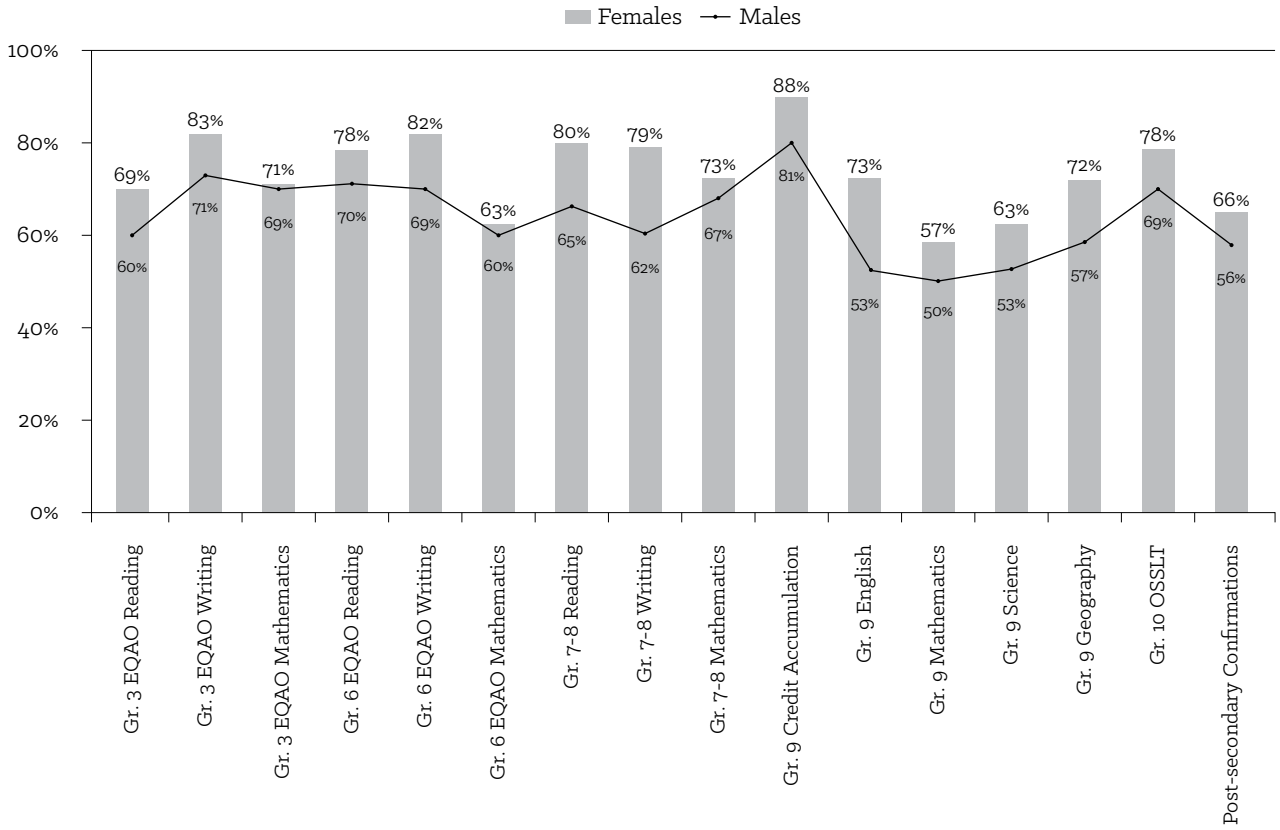
Literacy Test, special education needs identification and secondary school program of study, the TDSB roughly mirrors the proportions of the province (EQAO, 2012; Statistics Canada, 2008; TDSB, 2013b).

Due to the TDSB's distinctive demographic make-up, it is essential to investigate how trends in achievement, access, and well-being are distributed across disparate student groups. This article reviews a selection of TDSB analyses enabled through their extensive data collection. Variables, such as family income, parents' level of education, parental presence, ethno-racial status, and students' primary language spoken, have been explored across several academic outcome measures. Although it is important to remember that correlation does not indicate causation, the following analyses reveal key trends deserving greater investigation.

GENDER AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

A gender analysis was conducted across a number of achievement indicators, spanning Grade 3 to post-secondary access. Figure 1 demonstrates a notable and consistent gender gap. Although there was some fluctuation, female students consistently outperformed their male counterparts across all measures. In light of these results, questions have emerged as to whether achievement expectations are reflective of ongoing constructions of gender. Questions as to whether gender role expectations align or conflict with achievement expectations deserve further investigation.

FIGURE 1: GENDER AND ACHIEVEMENT



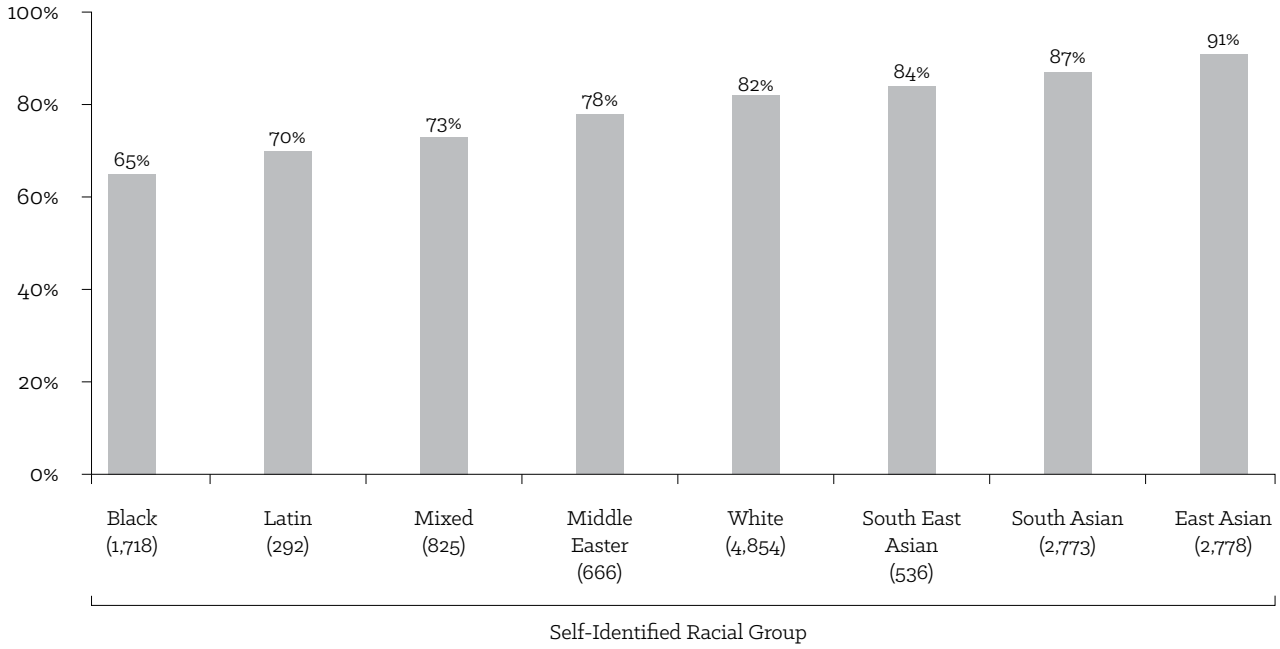
Achievement Category Details: Grade 3 EQAO, Grade 6 EQAO, and Grade 7-8 Report Card Results (at Level 3 and above), Grade 9 Credit Accumulation (Achieving 8 or more credits, 2011-12), Grade 9 Courses (at Level 3 or above), Grade 10 OSSLT (First-time eligible Grade 10 students, 2012-13), Post-secondary Confirmations (Grade 9 Cohort Fall 2006-Fall 2011).

Source: Fact Sheet Grade 3 & 6 Achievement Outcomes, Issue 6, March 2014; Fact Sheet Grade 7 & 8 Achievement Outcomes, Issue 7, March 2014; Fact Sheet Secondary Success Indicators, Issue 1, June 2013; and Fact Sheet Post-Secondary Pathways, Fact Sheet 3, The TDSB Grade 9 Cohort 2006-2011; and Research and Information Services, 2013.

RACE AND GRADUATION RATES

Employing graduation data from the Toronto District School Board's Grade 9 Cohort (2006-11), an analysis was conducted across self-identified racial groups in the TDSB. Figure 2 includes graduation data of students who have graduated "on time" or within four years from starting secondary school. As observed in Figure 2, there are notable differences between racial groups. Students who self-identified as Black had a graduation rate of 65% compared to students who self-identified as East Asian (91% graduation rate). Other self-identified racial groups fell somewhere in between. Students self-identifying as Black, Latin, and Mixed are groups who have experienced historical marginalization (Thobani, 2007) and currently have the lowest 4 year graduation rates within the TDSB. Results urge further investigation into the systemic barriers to academic success that self-identified Black, Latin, and Mixed students may be encountering both in school and within larger society.

FIGURE 2: TORONTO DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD GRADE 9 COHORT 2006-2011, GRADUATION RATES BY RACIAL GROUP



Source: Toronto District School Board. (2013). The TDSB grade 9 cohort 2006-2011: Graduation rate patterns, Fact Sheet No. 2. Retrieved from www.tdsb.on.ca/aboutus/research/reportsmore/reportsearch.aspx?type=fact%20sheets

STUDENT LANGUAGE AND POST-SECONDARY ACCESS

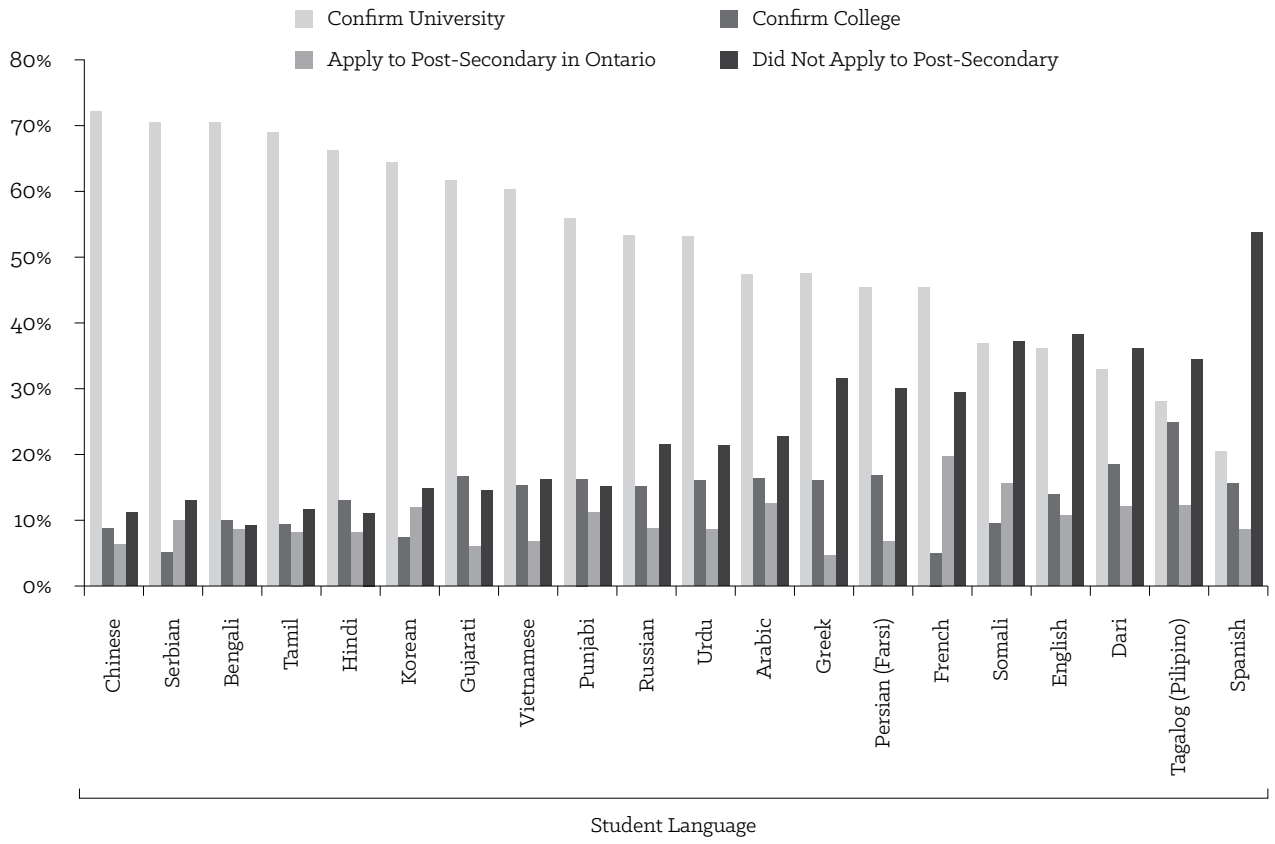
Employing data from the TDSB's Grade 9 Cohort (2006-11), the relationship between student language and post-secondary access was explored. The results illustrated in Figure 3 demonstrate notable disparities in relation to students' primary language spoken and their post-secondary access after 4 and 5 years of secondary school. The analysis includes students who confirmed an offer of acceptance to an Ontario university, students who confirmed an offer of acceptance to an Ontario college, students who applied to a post-secondary institution and did not confirm (either they confirmed elsewhere outside of Ontario or were not offered an acceptance), and students who did not apply to any post-secondary schools.

Organized by highest to lowest proportion of students confirming an offer of acceptance to an Ontario university, results demonstrated a 51.2% difference between students whose primary language was Chinese and students whose primary language was Spanish, with the majority of other student languages falling in between. Of students whose primary language was Chinese, 72.3% confirmed an acceptance to an Ontario university, while 11.4% did not apply to a post-secondary institute. Of Students whose primary language was Spanish, 21.1% confirmed an acceptance to an Ontario

university, while 53.6% did not apply to a post-secondary institute. Although the largest language group represented in the TDSB are students' whose primary language is English, they had a rate of confirming an offer of acceptance to an Ontario university of 36.5%, while 38.3% did not apply to a post-secondary institute.

It is critical to better understand the underlying factors leading to the notable disparities of post-secondary access across students' primary language. Although differences in the pursuit of post-secondary access are not always clear, it is imperative that schools and school boards prioritize removing any barriers preventing certain student groups from reaching post-secondary education. Post-secondary outcomes are closely related to previous experiences of academic success (TDSB, 2013, Fact Sheet 3). Therefore greater attention to student engagement, school organization, academic tracking, and early access to positive educational experiences appear to be critical in enabling post-secondary access.

FIGURE 3*: GRADE 9 COHORT 2006-2011, POST-SECONDARY CATEGORY BY LANGUAGE



*All categories with less than 100 respondents are not reported.

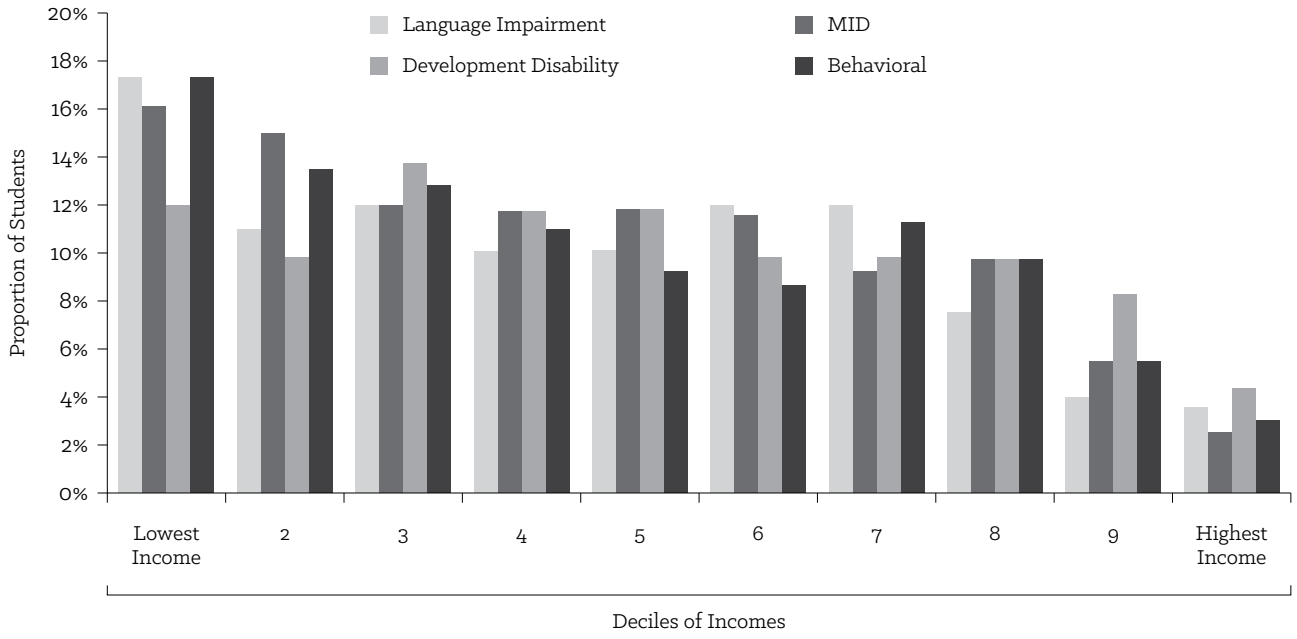
Source: Toronto District School Board. (2013). The TDSB grade 9 cohort 2006-2011: Trend data Fact Sheet No. 1. Retrieved from www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/AboutUs/Research/Gr9CohortFactSheet1TrendData.pdf

FAMILY INCOME AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

Family income has demonstrated to be highly correlated to academic outcomes. The family income variable employed in this analysis has been extracted from Statistics Canada through students' postal codes. Figure 4 shows the correlation between family income and the identification of one of four special education exceptionalities: Language Impairment, Mild Intellectual Disability, Development Disability, and Behavioural Disorder. As demonstrated in Figure 4, income has an almost linear correlation with the identification of these four exceptionalities. These results demonstrate that students who were identified with a Language Impairment, Mild Intellectual Disability, Development Disability, or

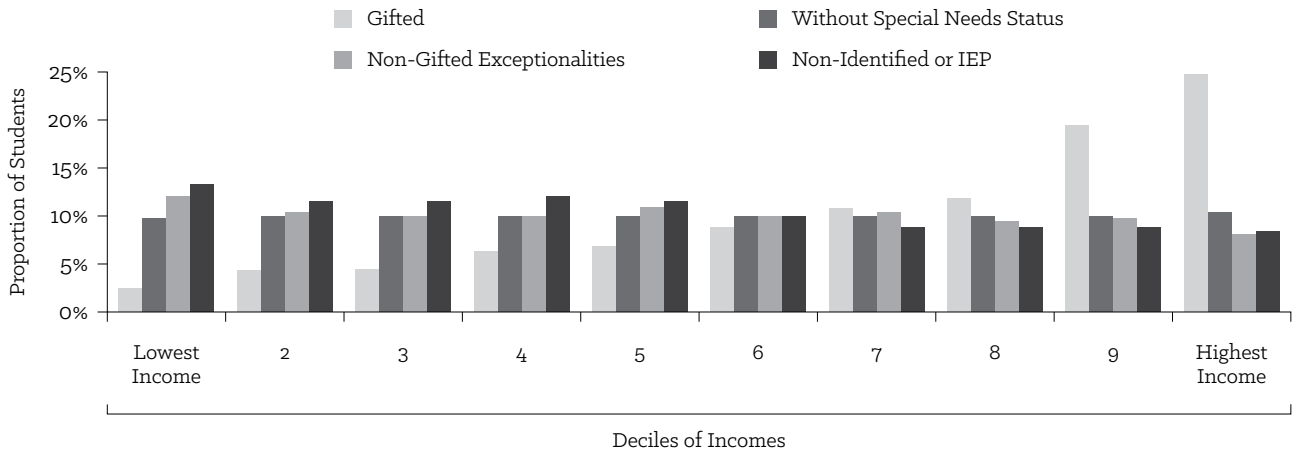
Behavioural Disorder were more likely to come from families within lower income deciles and much less likely to come from families within higher income deciles (TDSB, 2010, p. 20). In light of these results, it is important to deconstruct perceptions of achievement and ability, and how they may be influenced by the experience of poverty or affluence.

FIGURE 4: SELECTED EXCEPTIONALITIES (EXCLUDING GIFTED) BY FAMILY INCOME



Source: Brown & Parekh. (2010). *Special education: Structural overview and student demographics* (Research Report No.10/11-03). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Toronto District School Board. Retrieved from www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/AboutUs/Research/SpecEdStructuralOverviewStudentDemo.pdf

FIGURE 5: STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS ACROSS INCOME DECILES



Source: Brown & Parekh. (2010). *Special Education: Structural Overview and Student Demographics* (Research Report No. 10/11-03). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Toronto District School Board. Retrieved from www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/AboutUs/Research/SpecEdStructuralOverviewStudentDemo.pdf

EXCEPTIONALITIES (INCLUDING GIFTED) AND INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS BY INCOME

Figure 5 also investigates the correlation of student identification across deciles of income. In this case, variables for students identified as having any exceptionality (excluding Gifted), students who have not been formally identified, but who have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), students who have not been identified nor have an IEP, and students formally identified as Gifted have all been run across deciles of income. The analysis in Figure 5 demonstrates a notable difference at either end of the income spectrum, showing how more students identified with exceptionalities (excluding Gifted) and students who only have an IEP had greater representation within the lower income deciles and a notably smaller representation within the higher income deciles. Students without any identification or IEP were equitably stratified across all income deciles.

However, students identified as Gifted revealed a starkly contrasting trend with 56 % of students coming from the three highest income deciles in the TDSB (TDSB, 2010, p. 19). Again, this is an area where the conflation between privilege and perceptions of ability need to be critically explored.

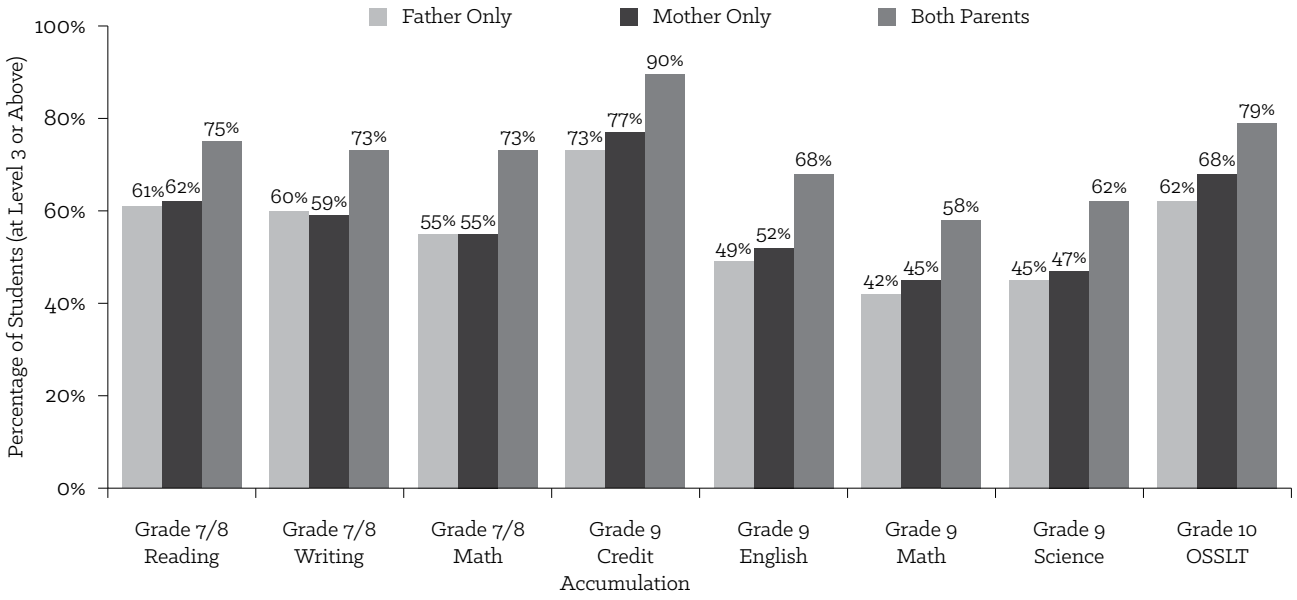
PARENTAL PRESENCE AND ACHIEVEMENT

Closely tied to family income, parental presence has also demonstrated to have a relationship with academic achievement. In this analysis, living with both parents means that students live with two parents, but not necessarily within the same home. Living with one parent indicates that students only ever live with a single parent. An analysis of parental presence across achievement indicators, spanning Grades 7 & 8 until the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test administered in Grade 10, demonstrated a consistent achievement gap across all achievement measures (see Figure 6). Overall, students who self-identified that they lived with two parents were more likely to encounter academic success compared to students who self-identified that they lived with one parent. These results necessitate further investigation into the resources available to parents living on their own and to look at how schools can accommodate any identified gaps.

PARENTAL EDUCATION AND ACHIEVEMENT

Parental education is an additional variable through which the TDSB can explore student achievement. Figure 7 demonstrates the correlation between mothers' level of education and the proportion of students scoring 'very low' on two domains (out of five) on the Early Development Index (EDI) in Senior

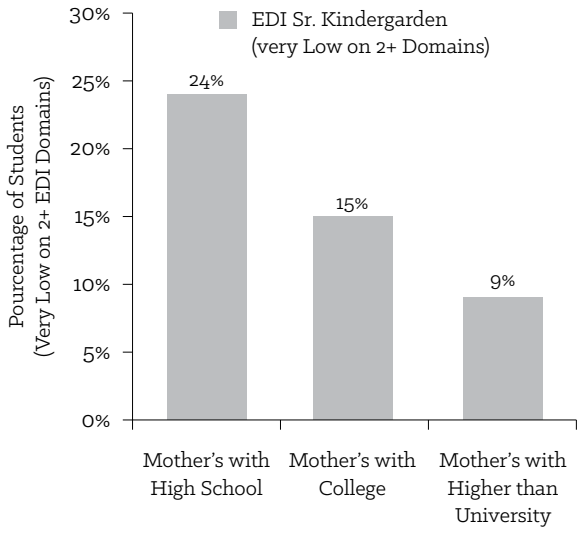
FIGURE 6: ACHIEVEMENT RESULTS BY PARENTAL PRESENCE - GRADES 7 & 8, GRADE 9 AND GRADE 10 OSSLT, 2013



Source: Toronto District School Board Fact Sheet Grade 7 & 8 Achievement Outcomes, Issue 6, June 2013. Toronto District School Board Fact Fact Sheet Secondary Success Indicators, Issue 1, June 2013. Toronto District School Board Fact Fact Sheet Secondary Success Indicators, OSSLT, June 2013, and Research and Information Services, 2013. Retrieved from www.tdsb.on.ca/aboutus/research/reportsmore/reportsearch.aspx?type=fact%20sheets

Kindergarten. The results illustrated in Figure 7 point to a relationship between the level of education attained by students' mothers and students' scores on the Early Development Index (assessment conducted in Senior Kindergarten). Of students whose mothers had only attained a high-school level education, 24% scored very low on two or more domains of the EDI. This proportion dropped to 15% for students whose mothers had a college level education, and to 9% for students whose parents had a university level education.

FIGURE 7: MOTHER'S LEVEL OF EDUCATION ACROSS EDI RESULTS



Source: Sinay, 2010 as cited in 'The 2010-11 Environmental Scan of the Toronto District School Board' (p. 75). Retrieved from www.tdsb.on.ca/aboutus/research/environmentalscan.aspx

CONCLUSION

Due to the rich data collected through the TDSB's assemblage of tools including the TDSB's Student and Parent Censuses, the possibilities for exploration are limitless. Of particular importance are the analyses that uncover trends in both student achievement and well-being indicating the potential of existing barriers to equitable educational opportunities. The forms of analyses enabled through the TDSB's data sources are an important first step towards developing strategies and interventions that address existing, and often historical, issues of structural justice. Through the thorough collection and publication of its findings, the TDSB has committed to the active identification and resolution of prevailing inequities. The TDSB has a uniquely diverse ethno-racial, linguistic, and cultural student population embedded within an economically stratified urban environment. Opportunities to investigate the relational intersections of identity, institutional structure, and achievement will seek to inform policy makers and educationalists where and how interventions may be most effective.

ACKNOWLEDGE

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NOTES

1 "East Asian" is a TDSB category in which close to 80% of students are Chinese. The comparative category with Statistics Canada is Chinese.

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