

KNAER (Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research) Demographic Data and Student Equity

This KNAER university/school board collaboration examines how demographic data may be taken into consideration when planning for student achievement in order to identify opportunity gaps and to monitor progress in addressing these gaps. Four key questions were identified in the project, and are on issues related to a) the rationale for collecting the data, b) concerns arising from the collection of student data, c) successful methodological approaches, and d) dissemination and reporting of data analysis to school and community stakeholders for informed decision-making.. Future knowledge mobilization activities will continue to co-create and share knowledge and understandings on the collection, analysis, and reporting of demographic data, with the aim of supporting school boards in their goals of equity and inclusivity within their particular school communities. Immediate next steps include providing a venue for key educational decision-makers and community leaders to share information regarding their work with community stakeholders when using and community demographic, diversity and equity data.

The KNAER Demographic Data and Student Equity Project is a university/school board involving the York Centre for Education and Community (YCEC), Faculty of Education, York University and four school board partners: Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB), Peel District School Board (PDSB), Toronto District School Board (TDSB), and York Region District School Board (YRDSB). It seeks to support the Ontario educational community in the achievement of its equity and inclusivity goals. This KNAER funded project has to date included two educational community discussion forums, numerous professional conference presentations, and the development of a discussion paper. The discussion paper can be accessed on the project website: <http://knaer.wordpress.com/second-discussion-forum/>.

Current Context:

Numerous school boards across Canada are grappling with issues pertaining to the collection, use and reporting of demographic data. Participants in community discussion forums recommended that there is a need for more cohesive and comprehensive support for school boards as they determine the leadership approaches that are best for their unique school community contexts, and which will contribute to equitable and inclusive teaching and learning experiences for the students in their districts. Such support may include the development/innovation of Knowledge Mobilization (KM) resources for various stakeholders – and such KM products need to generate awareness, build school board capacity, be useful as communication strategies both on a province-wide basis and on a local community basis, and be situated within a strategy that engages the press/media in the dialogue.

Background:

Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy sets out its vision for an equitable and inclusive education system where all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected, and every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning (Ministry of Education, 2009). In such education systems, stakeholders need to be informed about progress made towards reducing achievement gaps for all students through implementing equity and inclusive education principles. Some boards and schools are already systematically collecting and analyzing data (words, numbers, or observations) for the purpose of supporting those groups of students whose learning has not reached its full potential. Such data includes demographic data, which can be defined as:

Contextual data that relate to equity and inclusive education (e.g. students' ethnicity and/or gender; community socio-economic factors that may be taken into consideration when planning for improved student achievement, enrolment, attendance, and graduation data) (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 46)

Four key questions have been identified throughout the project:

- (1) What is the rationale for collecting student data?
- (2) What concerns does student data collection raise?
- (3) What methodological approaches are likely to be most successful?
- (4) How should information about the data collection and associated research and analysis be disseminated?

What is the rationale for collecting student data?

The purpose of collecting such data is: to identify achievement gaps (i.e., group differences in grades, test scores, graduation rates, etc.); to uncover any underlying opportunity gaps (i.e., uneven distributions of resources or learning opportunities) that may contribute to achievement gaps; to support the implementation of programs to address those gaps; and to monitor the results of those programs.

What concerns do student data collection raise?

Collecting student data raises a number of concerns among students, parents, and educators. One concern is that achievement gaps can become self-fulfilling prophecies, especially for students in lower achieving groups. Another concern is that those lower achieving groups will be stigmatized or that any type of grouping can create a false sense of homogeneity within groups and be perceived as a threat to students' individuality. As well, the collection of demographic data can be perceived by students and their parents as a violation of privacy.

Educators may object to the collection of student data. They may be uncomfortable with the possibility that their own pedagogical methods are being evaluated or that achievement gaps will be blamed on teachers, or they may be ideologically opposed to the proposed uses of the data. Finally, stakeholders are often suspicious that the effort that goes into data collection will not be appropriately matched by efforts to derive full value from the data.

What methodological approaches are likely to be most successful?

The collection of student data carries a number of methodological considerations, many of them dependent on whether data collection is a provincial policy or one developed at the school board level. Methodological considerations include: how the data will be collected; with what frequency it will be collected; whether longitudinal or cross-sectional data will be collected; and how confidentiality will be maintained. Selecting appropriate variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, family structure, racial/ethnic/linguistic background, sexual orientation) is also a key consideration, as is the overall form of any data collection instrument. In making methodological decisions, it is helpful to be in communication with the Information and Privacy Commissioner, and if applicable, the Ontario Human Rights Commission, throughout the process of developing a methodology.

How should information about the data collection and associated research and analysis be disseminated?

Community consultations and a comprehensive communication strategy should be implemented from the outset of any data collection project. This could include a number of different approaches: posters for students and staff, information cards and letters to parents, website updates, community radio announcements, announcements in community publications, voice messages to all student households, as well as consultations

with and presentations to principals and vice principals, school communities, parents, student leaders and paying particular attention to, and immigrant, faith and minority communities.

Often it is necessary to educate the public on how to interpret research and data. This involves building and emphasizing the relevance of data and being very clear and consistent in describing the purposes of data collection.

When communicating research results, a plain language summary and interpretation of the results is helpful, as is a clear description of how the research findings will be applied to the goal of improving the delivery and quality educational services. When working with the media to disseminate research results, key messages should be developed collaboratively with input from researchers, school board officials, and communications experts.

Future Steps:

Information exchange sessions can provide an opportunity for key educational decision-makers and community leaders to exchange experiences, strategies, and insights on ways to collaborate and share issues pertaining to the collection, use and community reporting of demographic, diversity, and equity data. Such sessions can serve as venues for conversation on the development of KM products that generate awareness and build local community capacity, and thereby provide support to school districts as each board determines the best strategies for their unique school community contexts.

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Project team members are very appreciative of the insights and expertise shared by the participants in our community discussion forums and numerous professional conference presentations. This includes participants at our October 24, 2011 *Discussion Forum: Re-Thinking Demographic Data in Terms of Student Equity* held at York University and at our March 6, 2012 *Discussion Forum: Towards the Use of Demographic Data for Educational Equity*, also held at York University. A note of thanks to Charles Ungerleider and Tracy Lavin of Directions, Evidence and Policy Research Group for their support in the development of the draft discussion paper that was circulated for review at the afore-mentioned March 16th, 2012 Discussion Forum.

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