

# **A Dangerous Conflation: A Review of the Literature on Curriculum Modification**

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## **Abstract**

Modifying the curriculum is a common practice used to support students with Individual Education Plans. Up to 15% of students in the Toronto District School Board have curriculum modifications by the time they reach Grade 8. However, despite their widespread use, the effectiveness of this well-established practice has seldom been examined. Research from Author (2022) suggests that there are negative long-term impacts associated with this practice and that some racialized groups are disproportionately placed on a modified curriculum. This literature review queries what is known about curriculum modifications. The findings reveal two significant issues with the terminology used in the existing literature: the challenge of translation and the problem of conflation. Additionally, the limited research available centres on only one exceptionality group (students with significant intellectual disabilities). These findings provide a foundation for future investigations into curriculum modifications, an area that demands immediate attention from the anti-oppression movement within special education.

**Keywords:** *curriculum modifications, individual education plan, accommodation, special education, anti-oppression*

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## Introduction

Modifying a student's curriculum is a widespread practice in elementary education that has received very little attention in academic literature. In the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), which serves approximately 235,000 students (TDSB, 2020), up to 15% of students are placed on a modified curriculum by the time they reach Grade 8 (Brown et al., 2022). But what is known about this practice?

Accommodations and modifications represent distinct methods for aiding students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs). An "accommodation" entails the removal of obstacles in the environment, educational materials, teaching techniques, and evaluation approaches to enable students to attain and display grade-level standards (Fisher & Frey, 2001; Janney & Snell, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). Examples of accommodations might include the use of enlarged print, text-to-speech technology, and extra time on tests. Curriculum modifications, however, are very different. Modification is the practice of changing grade-level expectations (Fisher & Frey, 2001; Janney & Snell, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). In Ontario,<sup>1</sup> this means that students may work on curriculum expectations from a different grade level, often two or more grades below their peers.<sup>2</sup> For example, a student in Grade 6 may work on Grade 4 (or lower) content in math and/or language. In other subjects, such as social studies and science, students typically work on simplified versions of grade-level expectations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). This decision is based on the teacher and IEP team's prediction of what a student can achieve by the end of the year. If they believe the student is not capable of meeting

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<sup>1</sup> While most provinces and territories in Canada use similar frameworks for accommodations and modifications, there are subtle differences in each Ministry of Education's policies. This article focuses on the Ontario context.

<sup>2</sup> In some cases, modifications are used to augment grade-level curriculum expectations by modifying to a higher level (e.g., some programs for students identified as gifted). Most modifications are done to lower or simplify expectations.

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grade-level expectations, despite having accommodations, a student will be placed on a modified curriculum.

The implications of modifications are tremendous. In Ontario, students with accommodations are evaluated at grade level; they pass each grade like their peers and can obtain their secondary school diploma. Those with curriculum modifications, however, do not pass their grade. They are “transferred” from grade to grade and their attainment of a secondary school diploma may be jeopardized (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Although there has not yet been any academic research on the topic, educators, families, and community organizations have expressed concerns about the overuse of curriculum modifications. Based on my 15 years of K–12 teaching experience, the decision to modify a student’s curriculum is often made in the primary and junior grades. Once that decision is made, it is rarely revisited. Additionally, in my experience, instruction to close the gaps is seldom provided, and the student’s academic level simply increases incrementally each year. This especially poses problems during the Grade 8 to 9 transition as these students leave Grade 8 only ever having been taught curriculum content from Grade 6 or lower. Then, they are expected to pass Grade 9 courses<sup>3</sup> without exposure to the requisite skills taught in Grades 7 and 8. This systemic barrier seriously disadvantages students and is nearly impossible to overcome. Although there has not yet been any academic literature to support these claims, the Ontario Human Rights Commission has recognized these concerns. They write:

Putting modifications in place for a student is a serious decision that may have lifealtering negative consequences. When curriculum expectations are modified to a lower grade level, students often do not catch up to peers or return to the standard curriculum. Students who

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<sup>3</sup> In Ontario, curriculum modifications are generally not permitted in secondary school. In rare circumstances, curriculum modifications can be permitted at the discretion of the principal.

reach high school without meeting Grade 8 curriculum expectations are likely to be streamed into classes that limit their choices for future education and employment. (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, p. 322)

Previous research has established that the education system is susceptible to structural inequalities manifested through various channels such as streaming (Clandfield & Martell, 2014; Parekh & Brown, 2019), disciplinary measures (Owens & McLanahan, 2020), over-identification of racialized students with subjective exceptionalities like behavioural disorders, learning disabilities, and mild intellectual disabilities (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles et al., 2010), and the disproportionate enrollment of racialized students in self-contained programs that limit their future prospects (Mitchell, 2010). A recent study in the TDSB reveals a similar pattern for the use of curriculum modifications. Brown et al. (2022) found that Black students were more than twice as likely to be placed on a modified curriculum. Furthermore, they found that students who were placed on a modified curriculum were significantly less likely to apply for post-secondary programs (college or university). With evidence of both disproportionate racial representation and negative long-term outcomes, it appears as though this practice may be functioning as a mechanism for systemic racism.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this literature review was to explore what is known about the policy and practice of curriculum modification. The specific objectives of the review were to investigate: (1) how various IEP terms (e.g., adaptations, accommodations, modifications, etc.) are defined in academic literature; (2) for whom, and under what conditions modifications are intended and/or used; and (3) what is known about the impacts of curriculum modifications.

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### **Methods and Data Sources**

The sources for this literature review were identified through a variety of methods, including searching electronic databases (ERIC and JStor), locating policy documents on government websites, and reviewing the bibliographies of selected studies. A lengthy search revealed very little literature published on the topic of curriculum modifications. With only three academic articles containing cursory references to curriculum modifications in the Canadian context, the review was expanded to include international contexts.

Using the search terms “modification,” “adaptation,” “accommodation” and several synonyms and variations, 356 articles were collected from ERIC and JStor. Articles were included if they explicitly studied or even simply mentioned the practice of modifying an academic curriculum (specifically lowering expectations) in terms of what is being learned or evaluated. After reviewing all abstracts, 42 articles were included. Of these, three articles were situated within the Canadian context, 32 within the American context, and an additional seven articles were found from overseas contexts, including Israel, India, Australia, Greece, Ghana, Korea, and Switzerland.

### **Results and Interpretations**

Three key findings emerged from the small body of literature. The first two findings relate to the use of terminology. First, the technical terminology (e.g., “accommodation,” “adaptation,” “modification”) is used inconsistently by researchers, practitioners, and policy makers. This makes a synthesis of findings impossible without a careful translation of terms. The second finding relating to terminology is that many authors conflate the terms “accommodation” and “modification.” This is problematic because it renders much of the available literature on the impacts of modifications moot. The final finding of this review is that there is virtually no

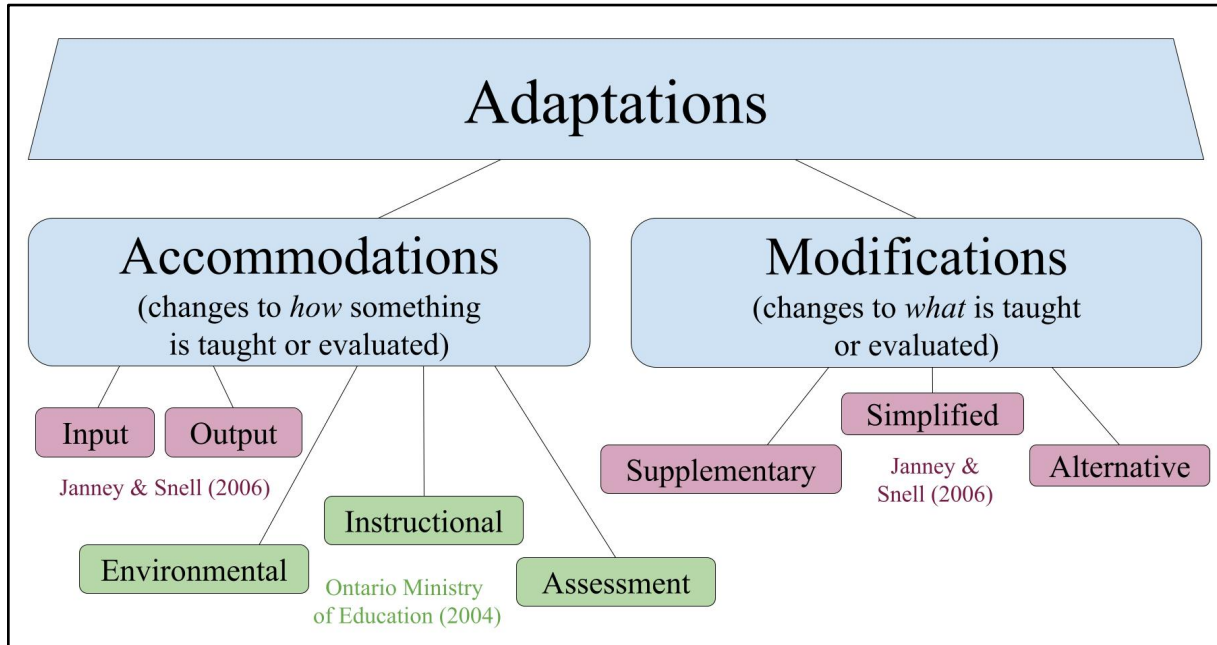
literature examining the use of curriculum modification for any exceptionality group except for students identified as having an intellectual disability.

### ***The Challenge of Translation***

Many scholars (Cho & Kingston, 2013; Dee, 2010; Fisher & Frey, 2001; Janney & Snell, 2006; Kurth et al., 2020; Kurth & Keegan, 2014; O. Lee & Shin, 2020; Nolet, 2006; Paccaud & Luder, 2017; Vaughan & Henderson, 2016) use the terms “accommodation” and “modification” in line with the Ontario Ministry of Education and the US Department of Education (Center for Parent Information and Resources, n.d.). Sometimes these terms are used under the umbrella term of “adaptations” (see Figure 1), and sometimes the categories are broken down into subcategories. For example, Janney and Snell (2006) add three sub-groups of modifications, including “supplementary” (goals related to remediation of basic skill deficits or compensatory skills), “simplified” (simplification of existing grade-level expectations), and “alternative” (goals outside the curriculum that support learning). The Ontario Ministry of Education (2010) uses three different subcategories of accommodations (environmental, instructional, and assessment) and frames “alternative” goals as a third companion to “accommodations” and “modifications” (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

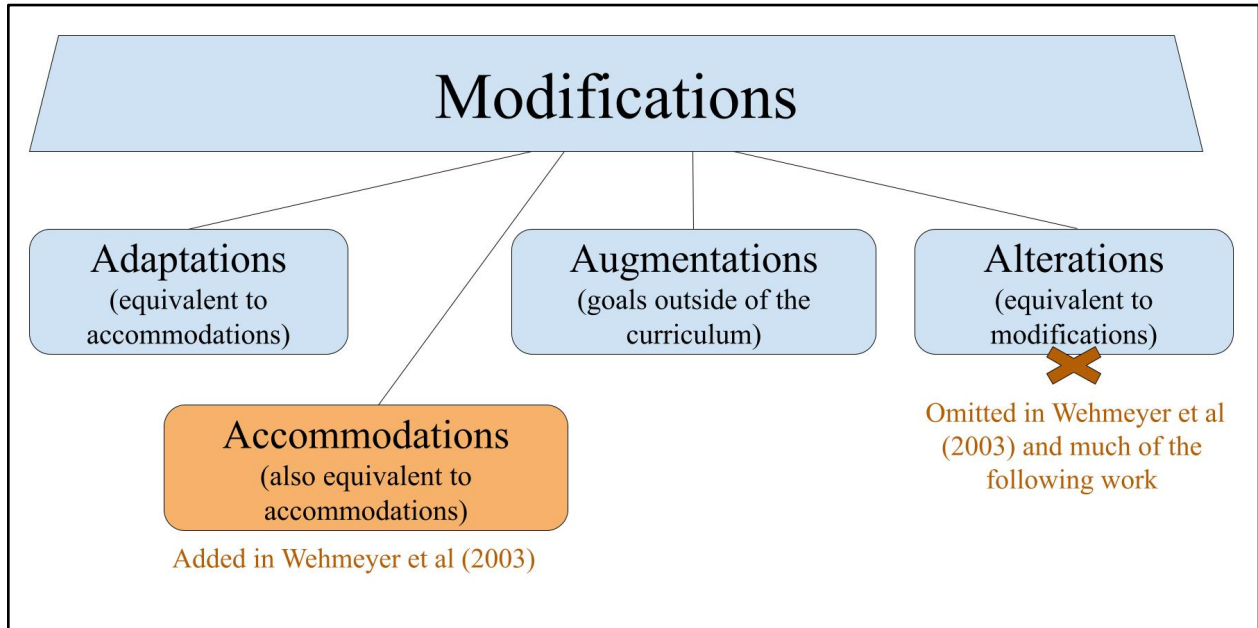
*Ministry of Ontario and US Department of Education framework with Janney & Snell's (2006) subcategories*



Another group of scholars (Cho & Kingston, 2014; S. Lee et al., 2006; Lee et al., 2008; Lee et al. 2010; Soukup et al., 2007; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015; Wehmeyer et al., 2003) use different terminology to describe the same concepts. In 2001, Wehmeyer and colleagues used the term “modifications” as an umbrella term to encompass adaptations (the equivalent to Ontario’s “accommodations”), “augmentations” (the equivalent to Ontario’s “alternative”), and “alterations” (the equivalent to Ontario’s “modifications”) (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Wehmeyer and colleagues' frameworks. Blue items represent the original (2001) and orange represents the change (2003)*



Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers engaging with this literature should be aware of the inconsistency of terminology in the literature. Definitions of the terms are rarely provided, and findings can easily be misinterpreted if there is misalignment between how the authors and readers use the terms. The inconsistent use of terminology is confusing, but it can be overcome by carefully translating conflicting terms and paying close attention to the definitions or descriptions of practices, rather than their actual names. With careful translation, readers can glean helpful insights from the literature. This is not the case, however, with the second terminology issue: the problem of conflation.

### ***The Problem of Conflation***

The second issue with the terminology is the erroneous conflation of accommodations with modifications. All three articles written in the Canadian context (Koehler & Wild, 2019; Lin



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& Lin, 2015; Tremblay & Belley, 2017) demonstrate this conflation. First, Tremblay and Belley (2017) provide a textual analysis comparing the templates for IEP documents in the 13 provinces and territories in Canada. They compared how seven components of IEPs (family communication, identification of disability, planning, collaboration, adaptations, review, and transition plans) are documented across the different jurisdictions. Although they define both accommodations<sup>4</sup> and modifications, they do not analyze them separately. They also do not discuss the significance of their differences or the unique approaches to the documentation of modifications in some provinces.

In the second Canadian article, Koehler and Wild (2019) examine the access and participation of students with visual impairments in the science curriculum. They too display the conflation between accommodations and modifications, as well as a general misunderstanding of the terms. In their survey of 51 teachers, they asked “If your students with visual impairments are not being fully included, please describe modifications made to the activity or alternative activities in which the students participated” (p. 9). Participants listed strategies such as “modifying equipment, using tactile models or providing verbal descriptions of visual materials” (p. 9), all of which are considered accommodations according to most Canadian policy documents (Alberta Education, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2017). At no point do the authors or participants discuss changing learning outcomes or lowering expectations for students. Therefore, this article does not provide insight into the use of curriculum modifications.

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that Tremblay and Belley’s use of terminology is consistent with Quebec’s Ministry of Education, where “accommodation” is the umbrella term used to encompass both “adaptations” and “modifications” (Government of Quebec, n.d.).

In the third Canadian article, Lin and Lin (2015) focus on the need for training teacher candidates on the use of inclusive assessment practices. While the authors do provide accurate definitions of the terms, there are other instances that reveal the conflation of accommodations and modifications. For example, they use the short form “ACC,” which is an abbreviation for “accommodation,” to represent both accommodations and modifications (p. 776). Also, only one out of the seven survey questions in the “ACC” section refers to modifications. In this question, Lin and Lin ask participants to respond to the statement “It is very useful to modify assessment for students with special needs” (to be answered on a 5-point Likert scale) (p.777). This question is inappropriate if modification is understood as a practice that is only necessary for *some* students with special education needs who cannot access grade-level expectations despite having high-quality accommodations. Despite their accurate definitions, it appears the authors still conflate the terms.

As with the Canadian context, a significant number of the international articles demonstrate the conflation (Avisar, 2012; Butler & Nasser, 2020; Finnerty et al., 2019; Fitzpatrick & Theoharis, 2014; Kurth & Keegan, 2014; Moores-Abdool, 2010; Morningstar et al., 2015; ShaBazz, 2019; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014). Two quotes are particularly illustrative of this effect. First, Fitzpatrick and Theoharis (2014) write, “school representatives can work collaboratively with the families to establish a framework which may include consultation, supports, services, accommodations and modifications, and other available resources to better enable the student to achieve success” (p. 3). As the punctuation suggests, accommodations and modifications are considered as a single entity, rather than separate options within this list of possible supports. A second example is from Butler and Nasser (2020). They write that “despite having supportive accommodations and modifications, Illinois students who

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receive special education services have lagged behind their general education peers” (p. 1). Here, the authors reveal an assumption that, like accommodations, the purpose of modifications is to close learning gaps when in fact it is not possible to close the gap while the modification is in place.

The problem with conflating modifications with accommodations is that key differences between the two strategies are rendered invisible. An accommodative approach assumes that the barriers for the student are predominantly situated within the environment. It is believed that the student has the potential to succeed if those barriers are eliminated. A modified approach, however, assumes that the student will not be able to meet standards, even when physical, pedagogical, and other barriers are eliminated. A conflation of these two approaches erases the underlying assumptions of potential, and who holds the responsibility to eliminate barriers. Dangerously, it also renders the different impacts of the practices invisible. When attributes of accommodations – necessary, benevolent, a human right – are associated with modification, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners fail to see the potential harms of the practice. As stated earlier, students with accommodations pass their grade. Those with modifications don’t which, as the Ontario Human Rights Commission has stated, may result in “lifealtering negative consequences” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, p.322).

The conflation also renders several articles unusable for the purposes of understanding research on curriculum modification. After eliminating these articles, the already small body of literature becomes even smaller as only seven articles that discuss actual modifications could be located. Interestingly, almost all of them relate to one particular group of students: those who have been identified as having intellectual disabilities.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Note on language: Language choices in special education are both important and complex. Within the critical disability movement, there is substantial debate around the use of person-first language (e.g., “person with a

*For Whom Are Curriculum Modifications Intended?*

Six of the seven articles that specifically and accurately address curriculum modifications do so in the context of supporting students with “intellectual disabilities” (S. Lee et al., 2006; Vaughan & Henderson, 2016), “significant intellectual disabilities” (Trela & Jimenez, 2013), “significant disabilities” (Fisher & Frey, 2001), “severe disabilities” (Finnerty et al., 2019), or “significant support needs,” usually below the first percentile of the student population (Kurth et al., 2020). Regardless of the terminology used to describe this population, they all argue in favour of using curriculum modifications as a strategy to include students. This is specific to students who have been identified as having significant intellectual disabilities in classes structured around the mainstream curriculum.

Interestingly, all of these articles come from the United States, where legislative changes influenced the work. In 1997, the American federal government reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It required that IEPs contain “measurable goals to enable the child to be involved with and progress in the general curriculum” (Wehmeyer et al., 2001, p. 327). It emerged during a period marked by heated debates concerning the balance between functional programming (e.g., self-care and life skills) and access to the general curriculum (e.g., literacy and numeracy) for students labeled as having intellectual disabilities (Browder, 2012; Finnerty et al., 2019; Kurth et al., 2020; S. Lee et al., 2006; Paccaud & Luder,

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disability”) and identity-first language (e.g., “disabled person”). While person-first language is often used in education and legal contexts (United Nations, 2006), many members of the disabled community prefer identity-first language as it acknowledges their pride in their identities, their lived experiences, and the ableist barriers they face (Linton, 1998). However, applying these arguments to the education context is particularly difficult because not all students engaging in special education services are formally identified with impairments, nor do they self-identify as disabled (Parekh & Brown, 2020). In recognition of the multiple viewpoints on this topic, I adopt both identity-first and person-first language in this article. In this instance, I use “identified as having intellectual disabilities” in order to acknowledge that it is a label imposed on people. By using this term, I also acknowledge that IQ tests have many flaws (including a racist history and ongoing cultural biases) (Dolmage, 2017; Gould, 1996; Withers, 2012) and that it is not possible to know the intellectual capabilities of individuals, especially those who don’t use a formal communication system.

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2017; Trela & Jimenez, 2013), an ongoing dilemma for educators today (Finnerty et al., 2019).

Within this framework, modifications served as a means for students identified as having intellectual disabilities to access academic instruction beyond what they would typically receive.

According to Fisher and Frey (2001), these curriculum modifications facilitated the principle of partial participation. Fisher and Frey (2001) describe:

The principle of partial participation was a response to four frequently cited reasons for maintaining restrictive settings: the developmental age hypothesis,<sup>6</sup> the all-or-nothing hypothesis,<sup>7</sup> the independent performance hypothesis,<sup>8</sup> and the prerequisite skills hypothesis.<sup>9</sup> The principle of partial participation was introduced to circumvent these paradigms.... [Baumgart and colleagues] further identified a process to individualize adaptations [including modifications] to allow students “to participate at least partially in a particular chronological age-appropriate and functional activity.” (p. 148)

Popularity of the principle of partial participation grew with the inclusion movement, and several authors contributed to literature on using modifications to ensure access to the general curriculum. This body of literature includes discussions on *how* to modify curricula as well as the benefits of the practice (Janney & Snell, 1997; Jorgensen, 1998). This research was conducted at a time when the practice of curriculum modification was emerging, and very little research has been conducted since.

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<sup>6</sup> If the student’s IQ test determines they are below the mental age where the skill typically appears, they shouldn’t try it.

<sup>7</sup> If they can’t do all of it, they shouldn’t try any of it.

<sup>8</sup> If they can’t do it independently, they shouldn’t do it at all.

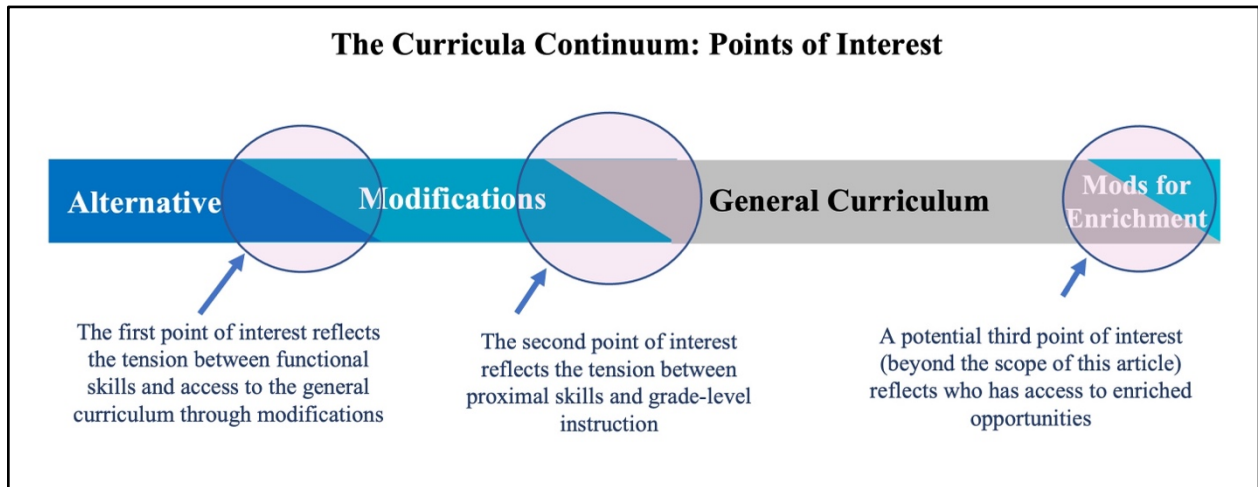
<sup>9</sup> If they don’t have the prerequisite skills, they shouldn’t be taught it.

### *What is Known about the Impacts of Curriculum Modifications?*

To frame this discussion, it may be helpful to conceptualize curricula on a continuum (see Figure 3).

#### **Figure 3**

##### *The Curricula Continuum*



Thus far, the available research on curriculum modifications focuses on ‘the first point of interest’: the tension between alternative goals<sup>10</sup> and access to the general curriculum for students who have been identified as having intellectual disabilities. Findings on the impacts of curriculum modifications for this population have been very positive because they can be a mechanism for inclusion and a way of maintaining high expectations for some students (Janney & Snell, 2006; S.-H. Lee et al., 2006; Soukup et al., 2007; Trela & Jimenez, 2013). The impacts of curriculum modifications on students who are in ‘the second point of interest’ (on the cusp of accessing grade-level content)<sup>11</sup> have yet to be studied.

<sup>10</sup> Alternative goals are learning expectations that are not part of the provincial curriculum. It should be noted that “alternative” curriculum has two different applications in Ontario. For most students, alternative goals *supplement* curriculum expectations. For students identified as having significant intellectual disabilities who are educated in full-time special education classes (known as DD-ISPs), alternative goals may *replace* the general or modified curriculum. Alternative goals that *replace* the curriculum are represented on the left of the curriculum continuum. Alternative goals that *supplement* the general or modified curriculum are not represented in this continuum.

<sup>11</sup> There may also be a third point of interest around modifications to enhance grade-level curriculum—particularly who has access to enriched programs. That area of concern is beyond the scope of this literature review.

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While modifications can be a mechanism for inclusion for some, they may have the opposite effect for others. Take for example, a student with a learning disability. Modifying the curriculum can be an example of *lowering* expectations, rather than providing the necessary supports, accommodations, or interventions to close the gaps. This lowering of expectations ultimately limits access to curriculum and influences placement decisions. While this has yet to be demonstrated explicitly in the curriculum modifications research, some scholars included in this review made comments that suggest some concern. For example, in the Indian study on the impact of math modifications on the transition to higher secondary school, Eichhorn (2016) argues that well-meaning teachers accidentally disadvantaged their students at higher grade levels. A second example was found in a discussion paper relating to using assessment data to ensure access to the general curriculum. There, Nolet (2006) writes:

The decision to make an instruction modification is an important one and should not be made lightly, or by one teacher acting alone. There are both long- and short-term implications of curricular modifications. Some modifications may put the student at a great disadvantage on assessments, and those assessments may have significant consequences for students as well as for schools. (p. 11)

These expressions of caution lay a foundation for future research on the long-term implications of curriculum modifications.

### **Educational Importance of the Study**

This literature review has revealed that there is very little research on curriculum modifications. After factoring in issues of translation and conflation, there were only seven articles addressing the topic. Most available articles on the topic argue in favour of using modifications as a tool for the inclusion of students identified as having intellectual disabilities.

However, what is enabling for some may be disabling for others. With this tension in mind, discussion of curriculum modifications should not be centred on their existence, but rather, how and why educators enact curriculum modifications for particular students.

With almost 15% of students in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) placed on a modified curriculum, the frequency of use has far exceeded what has been noted in the existing literature. Furthermore, with evidence of disproportionate enactment for students from historically marginalized groups, as well as negative long-term outcomes (Brown et al., 2022), it appears as though this practice may be functioning as a mechanism for systemic racism. Future research investigating the frequency of use, long-term outcomes, and decision-making process is essential to the equity and anti-oppression movement in Canadian education systems.



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