Policy Brief No. 13
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Disabled Children’s Participation in the National Childcare Strategy

Introduction

This brief presents recommendations on how to ensure disabled children's participation in policy changes and provincial responses to the Canada Wide Early Learning and Childcare Agreement (CWELCC, 2021). CWELCC is premised on the principles identified in the Multilateral Early Learning and Childcare Framework (2017) which identifies four key areas: "access to high-quality, affordable, flexible and inclusive early learning and child care no matter where they live". We are interested in how these notable areas of focus fit with children's right to participate in decision making that concerns them. We draw on current theory in children's participation, as well as research findings from the IECSS project, to make recommendations about how, and where to integrate disabled children's participation in childcare policy.

All of the provincial and territorial agreements commit to creating "inclusive and equitable" child care spaces, with funds dedicated to creating these spaces. The Ontario agreement, for example, states that the province will "develop and fund a plan that supports access to licensed child care spaces for vulnerable children and children from diverse populations, including, but not limited to, children living in low income families, children with disabilities and children needing enhanced or individual supports, Indigenous children, Black and other racialized children, children of newcomers to Canada, and official language minorities" (Government of Canada, 2022b). It is notable that there is a lack of identifiable next steps, particularly steps that will positively affect disabled children and their access and opportunities in early learning programs across the province. None of the agreements define inclusion, and none of them show evidence of understanding the experiences of disabled children and their families in the early learning and care environment.

The Inclusive Early Childhood Service System Project (IECSS)

This policy brief was prepared by Kristen Tollan, Research Assistant, and Kathryn Underwood, Professor, Toronto Metropolitan University and Project Director for the Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project (IECSS). The IECSS project is a multi-year partnership that seeks to understand how institutions are constituted in our society in order to organize children and their families. The project focuses on disabled childhoods in the context of family, community, and society.

IECSS is funded by SSRHC/CRSH and Toronto Metropolitan University. To learn more about IECSS, our partners, a full list of our team, and to see other publications from IECSS please visit our website:

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Disability

Disability is not defined in any of the provincial agreements. In fact, many of them reference special needs, or use other terminology that does not recognize disabled children's existence. When it is referenced, disability is typically understood to be an individual trait defined by impairment, needs and functionality.

The Ontario Human Rights commission says that disability “covers a broad range and degree of conditions, some visible and some not visible. A disability may have been present from birth, caused by an accident, or developed over time. The Code protects people from discrimination because of past, present and perceived disabilities.” This definition is useful in setting up a rights framework, which should not require diagnosis or medical gatekeeping for children to be recognized as disabled. However, that does not mean that they should not be considered in the design and activities of the program. All child care spaces should be designed for all children, meaning that as new spaces are added, they should be designed with the recognition that the number of disabled children is fluid and that the staff may not have access to, or need, medicalized information about the child.

Disabled children’s views are subjected to greater scrutiny and are less likely to be actively participating in decisions related to their care, education, intervention (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014; Franklin & Sloper, 2009). If children require adult support to participate, or for communication, they may not be included as active contributors, or their contributions may be attributed to others. The capacity of disabled children to participate in decisions about their own service provisions and care is well documented (Cavet & Sloper, 2004; Franklin & Sloper, 2009). Disabled young people have led research and recommendations for service planning and early education (Davies, et al., 2021). Kennan, et al. (2018) have noted that advocates are an effective mediating approach to children’s participation.

The idea that children are entitled to participation in decision-making is a central tenet of children’s rights frameworks, identified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, comes from many fields of study, including an area of research referred to as “disabled children’s childhood studies” (DCCS). DCCS is a distinct approach to understanding childhood; it represents a significant paradigm shift away from deficit models of understanding disability and disabled children in particular. It also aims to contrast Eurocentric, Western ideals of normalcy and “the standard child”. Scholars in the field draw on work in disability studies, which critiques medical, individualist discourses of understanding impairment (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014).

Participation

There is no reference in any of the provincial agreements or in the national framework to children’s participation in the decisions that are being made that will affect them. Children’s participation has been legally endorsed in policies and statutes including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 states that “Children have a right to express their views and opinions on matters that affect them. Children’s views should be considered based on the individual child’s age and maturity level” (article 12).

Participation and the rights of disabled children are also recognized in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (articles 29 & 30 and article 7, respectively). However, some scholars have pointed out that the participation of disabled children is more precarious than that of their typically developing peers (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014). The promotion of inclusive education for disabled children is prevalent, but often neglects to include the participation of disabled children themselves (Nolas, 2015).

Integrating Disabled Children’s Viewpoints into Everyday Work

Increasing children's participation in decision-making, both about their own needs and wellbeing and about service development, is a policy issue that should be made a priority (Franklin & Sloper, 2008). Research on children’s participation emphasizes the importance of involving children in decisions about their welfare. This involvement includes presenting opportunities for children to express their views and opinions on matters that concern them, but also, implementing these views wherever possible (Kennan et al, 2018).

The encapsulation of “children’s participation” can be interpreted in various ways, but the general perspective is that children should be listened to, supported to express their views, which are taken into account, and also involved in decision-making processes, with a shared power and responsibility for decision-making (Shier, 2001). Furthermore, the emphasis on promoting children’s participation is primarily focused in institutional environments that have the most contact with young people: schools, healthcare setting and children’s welfare services (Nolas, 2015).

Research continues to show that children’s participation is important in developing their agency and self-determination as well as emphasizing their capabilities and achievements (Nolas, 2015). As such, calls for participation continue to be embedded into relevant policies and laws, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, there is still a noticeable gap in research and policy enhancing the participation of disabled children. This brief explores the need for greater recognition of the wants and needs of disabled children, specifically in promoting their involvement with the development of institutional policies that concern them.

Recommendations

- Disability identity is just as influential for a developing child and their future adult self as any other identity. It is important for educators and policy-makers to recognize this and foster a sense of acceptance and belonging for disabled students, rather than trying to push negative conceptions of disability and “normalize” the child.
- Educators must include disabled children, regardless of diagnosis or access to medical information. These clinical interactions should not be used for gatekeeping to services.
- Policy-makers considering issues that involve children must consider the needs and opinions of children of all backgrounds, including disabled children.
- Families of disabled children are important to involve in decision-making processes *alongside* their children, rather than as substitutes for the child and their insights.
- If disabled children are involved in a situation where they cannot be directly asked for their input, disabled adults are a useful asset as they were once disabled children using these services as well; lived experience is just as beneficial as academic and/or professional knowledge.

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