

Policy Brief No. 3: Recommendations for creating an INCLUSIVE early childhood education and care system

The Inclusive Early Childhood Service System Project (IECSS)

The Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project is a partnership between the County of Wellington and Ryerson University, working in conjunction with a number of academic, municipal and community partners (a full list is available online www.InclusiveEarlychildhood.ca).

The project is informed by extensive consultation and ongoing collaboration for the purpose of identifying research questions, designing the study, recruiting project staff and participants, analyzing data, and disseminating findings.

The purpose of the project is to better understand experiences of disability in early childhood and to understand how services are delivered in varied geographic and cultural contexts. Our aim is to build theoretical understanding that may inform social policy for the purpose of having more respectful and responsive supports that recognize the value of disability identities, and the need for universally designed services. The work presented in this brief is informed by the consultation and partnership. This policy brief is one outcome of the partnership.

The research partners include representatives from the domains of childcare, early intervention, social service planning, and research, as well as organizations that practice in these domains using Indigenous values. The researchers have expertise in social policy, disability studies, nursing, social work, and early childhood studies.

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This is the third in a series of policy briefs that are prepared as part of the IECSS Project. To view the other briefs in this series please visit our website.

A National Childcare Strategy

On October 19, 2015, Canada will have a federal election. One of the election issues that has been discussed by all major parties is childcare. Canada is known to spend less than other comparably wealthy nations on early learning and care, and childcare advocates have pressed the federal government to develop a national childcare strategy (ChildCare2020, 2014). One of the central messages from childcare advocates is that a national childcare strategy should be “inclusive” (Frankel & Underwood, 2014). This brief provides recommendations for defining inclusive early childhood education and care, and the needed steps for the development of a national childcare strategy that

is designed for participation of children experiencing disability and a range of developmental differences.

Diversity and Disability Discourse

Inclusion is about ensuring access to services for a wide range of individual children and their families. This means that the language of policy and associated practices should be flexible enough to account for differences amongst communities. For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has recommended the development of Aboriginal specific early childhood curricula (TRC, 2015), which should address differences in individual capabilities of children as well as Indigenous ways of viewing ability and child development. Further, the individual circumstances of families must be considered in the development of policy. At this time there are many services that require lengthy assessments, private funding of services, time during work hours and long wait times, which make them inaccessible to many families.

Policy Implication #1:

Inclusion is about diversity, so any policy must acknowledge the widely variable understandings of disability that exist across cultural viewpoints.

Children's Rights

As described in our Policy Brief No. 2 the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) supports families to have access to State funded care, without discrimination. In Policy Brief No. 2 we argue that this supports the right to high quality early childhood education and care. In addition, we note that the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) under its Health provisions outlines the right of all disabled children to early intervention where it is appropriate (Article 25, s.b). The right to accessible service free from discrimination and the right to early intervention have important policy implications for a national childcare strategy.

Policy Implication #2:

Inclusive practice is premised on the right of all children to access high quality early childhood education services as well as early intervention services.

Children and their families should not face barriers to accessing early intervention services. For example, children who cannot attend childcare full time because they are attending early intervention programs, should not be denied subsidy, or a childcare space. In addition clinical services that are a right of children with disabilities should be barrier free and integrated into childcare programs. These intersecting rights have implications for the organization of services as well as for the key stakeholders who are governed by childcare legislation (Vandenbroeck, 2015).

Policy Implication #3:

Service navigation and coordination need to be addressed in policy, in order to address the discrepancies between health, education and social services legislation.

Resource Consultation and Staff Support

In many parts of the country, licensed childcare has a system of itinerant support for childcare centres. This support, in the form of resource consultants, provides information and problem solving expertise to childcare centres to ensure inclusive practice. These staff are not intended to work directly with children but to provide support to childcare staff in their work. Typically these staff have specialized training in working with children with disabilities. Most jurisdictions also have systems of direct support to children with staff who are known as intensive support workers or resource teachers. An inclusive childcare system will support resource consultation (rather than resource teachers), but it should also ensure that centre staff are responsible for all children in the program. Research suggests that in-house resource consultants are effective (SpecialLink, 2004), likely because they are able to support staff while they are engaged in teaching.

Policy Implication #4:

The national childcare policy should ensure ongoing funding of itinerant resource consultation. In addition, centres should designate in-house staff for additional training, staff development, and communication with resource consultants.

Access and assessment

Assessment is important in educational contexts in order to understand learners' functioning and to better design educational programs. Assessment that is used to determine eligibility for service is fraught with problems. Assessments that are designed for diagnostic purposes can lead to erroneous judgments about children's capabilities and who is best suited to work with a particular child. For example, a developmental assessment that identifies a child with a clinical diagnosis, and therefore makes them eligible for early intervention, can lead educators to believe that an early intervention specialist is the only person suited to working with that child. Additionally, assessments that are used to determine eligibility for early intervention service do not allow for the variability within individual children's development. If a child is successful, they may lose important services, and if a child is not eligible based on narrow criteria they may be denied needed services. Services that are delivered through universal programs, such as childcare can help to avoid these pitfalls.

Policy Implication #5:

The need for assessments and qualifying criteria to access services is fundamentally a diagnostic approach that is not a good fit for education. Early intervention services and supports for individual children should be accessible without institutions reinforcing deficit or medicalized views of difference and disability.

Finally, the test of inclusivity will not be in how the program operates, or the developmental gains of individual children, but in how many families feel welcome and are able to access childcare. (Meece & O'Kelley, 2010).

References and Resources

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