

How ECEC programmes contribute to social inclusion in diverse societies

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*The more we get together, together, together
The more we get together, the happier we'll be*

Diversity: Part of the landscape

The Canadian children's song is sometimes used by early childhood educators as a metaphor for social inclusion in a practical sense – welcoming all children into the group, respecting and celebrating differences or learning to live together. For most Canadian children, 'getting together' with peers from diverse backgrounds happens every day from an early age. In an ordinary public school kindergarten or childcare centre in Toronto, a 3- or 4-year-old is likely to make friends with children who speak any of 40 languages at home; in some kindergarten classes in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, more than 50% of the children were born outside Canada or are from recently immigrated families (Larose et al. 2001).

Today cultural and racial diversity is part of the landscape in many – even previously homogeneous – countries. Canada is an especially diverse country; the most recent census data show that in-migration is among the highest in the world and the primary source of population growth (Statistics Canada 2007). While Canada is not conflict-ridden and overt discrimination is not rampant, the reality for immigrants and refugees to Canada is that, in spite of an official policy of multi-culturalism that dates back to 1971, many must struggle for recognition and respect, suitable employment and decent living conditions. At the same time, Canada's own indigenous populations – First Nations, Métis and Inuit – experience poverty and social exclusion on a continuing, severe and daily basis.

Early childhood education and care: Central in diverse societies

Today cultural and racial diversity is a reality in many countries and there is growing recognition that ensuring that modern diverse societies function is about more than 'the more we get together'. Instead, real recognition and respect for diversity requires thoughtful public policy that begins with a well-woven safety net of settlement, employment, training and education, health and economic and social programmes; all of which are important. But among these, it is recognised that early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a key link – a central connection in the safety net. ECEC can be a primary means of supporting and strengthening social inclusion in a meaningful way by playing multiple vital roles for both children and adults in creating social inclusion in diverse societies.

Drawing on the ideas of Amartya Sen (1999, 2000) Friendly and Lero (2002) developed a conception of how ECEC can strengthen social inclusion. In this analysis, socially inclusive societies are those in which members can: participate meaningfully and actively; have opportunities to join in collective experiences; enjoy equality; share social experiences and attain fundamental well-being. That is, a socially inclusive society provides equality of life chances and offers all members a basic level of well-being. Under the right conditions, ECEC is a primary means for enhancing this kind of social inclusion.

One reason that ECEC programmes are especially valuable is that they are multi-purpose, playing key roles for more than one group of people simultaneously. Well-designed, well-supported ECEC programmes can enhance children's development while – at the same time – supporting families' economic and social well-being, and they can ensure equity for women and for children with special needs while enhancing community solidarity. From this perspective, childcare centres, kindergartens and nursery schools together with family resource or support programmes are all intended to enhance children's well-being and learning, to support parents in a variety of ways and to help societies achieve collective goals.

**ECEC programmes as a means to social inclusion:
Key concepts and goals**

Four concepts inspire this idea that ECEC is a valuable means to social inclusion. The first is that development of talents, skills and capabilities in the early years affects both a child's well-being and its future prospects with an impact on the social, educational, financial and personal domains as the child matures into adulthood. A second concept is that the family and its environment – shaped by culture, ethnicity and race, class and income – have a significant impact on the developing child in early and throughout later childhood. Third, from a non-stigmatising perspective social inclusion is not only about reducing risk but is also about ensuring that opportunities are not missed. And a fourth concept takes a children's rights perspective in proposing that children are not merely adults-in-training but must be valued as children, not simply for what they may become later on.

In concert with these four concepts are four goals – all social inclusion goals in the broadest sense – for ECEC programmes. The first is to enhance children's well-being, development and prospects for lifelong learning. Contemporary research informs the implementation of this goal with two evidence-based pieces of information: firstly, ECEC programmes can benefit all children (although children from low-income or poorly resourced homes may benefit most) whether or not the mother is in the paid workforce, and regardless of the family's origin or social class. Particularly for a child from a low-income family, good-quality ECEC may make the

difference between educational marginalisation and success. Secondly, the research shows that it is the quality of ECEC that makes the critical difference; good-quality ECEC programmes positively support children's development, while poor-quality programmes may even be harmful (Shonkoff and Phillips 2001).

The second social inclusion goal for ECEC programmes is to support parents in education, training and employment. Reliable, affordable ECEC programmes help reduce social exclusion that is linked to poverty, unemployment and marginal employment, disempowerment and social isolation, all of which have effects not only on the adult family members but are mediated through the family to the child. The absence of reliable, affordable ECEC may make the difference between employment and precarious employment, or training and no training and – ultimately – poverty or solvency, especially for socially excluded families,.

Third, while all four goals are connected to equity either through development of capabilities or access to resources, for two groups – women and children with disabilities – ECEC is especially fundamental to equity and social justice. That “child care is the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers” (Abella 1984) is not a new idea, but it is central to proposals for improving children's lives by strengthening the status of women (UNICEF 2007). However, the idea that access to mainstream social and educational programmes for disabled children is a social justice issue may be a newer idea in some countries that have not fully accepted the idea that all individuals have the right to full participation in their communities – regardless of ability.

The fourth social inclusion goal – strengthening social solidarity and social cohesion – is especially pertinent in diverse societies. Early childhood is a critical period for learning about difference and diversity and establishing a basis for tolerance; research shows that children recognise racial differences and hold opinions about race by the age of three. Consequently, inclusive childhood education programmes can enhance respect for diversity through their impact on children as future adults. However, as MacNaughton (2006) notes, “mere exposure to diversity may be insufficient”,



Early childhood programmes that include parents and that demonstrate respect for diversity can promote solidarity and equity among classes, racial and ethnic groups, and generations

suggesting the importance of programme content and the value of proactive pedagogies and practices. But ECEC programmes have the capacity to have a significant impact on adults too. Community-based programmes can support neighbourhood, community and interpersonal co-operation and social solidarity in the sense that they can be 'forums located in civil society' through which parents can participate in common activities related to the well-being of their children. ECEC programmes that include parents, are connected with community resources and that demonstrate respect for diversity can promote solidarity and equity among classes, racial and ethnic groups, and generations.

In these ways, ECEC programmes can strengthen solidarity within a geographic community, across class, ethnic and racial boundaries and can demonstrate that co-operation among racial and ethnic groups and social classes is possible and valued.

What is needed if ECEC is to contribute to social inclusion in diverse societies?

Well-designed, thoughtful public policy is fundamental if ECEC is to enhance child development; support parents; provide equity and strengthen social solidarity. Comparative research such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s Thematic Review of ECEC shows how certain elements of public policy including:

- universal, non-stigmatised access and participation rather than targeting to selected segments of the society or leaving out those who cannot afford market fees;
- a coherent policy approach that integrates care and early childhood education to ensure quality for children and access to the labour force;
- sensitive services for parents;
- substantial, well-directed public funding;
- community-based services that involve parents and are connected to community resources;
- high-quality programming developed through

a participatory process including a curriculum framework;

- staffing policies that integrate respect for diversity as a continuing programme element.

All these factors enable ECEC services to play a powerful role in strengthening social inclusion (OECD 2001; 2006; Friendly and Lero 2002).

These elements can build the system that is required to ensure that equity of access and quality are a reality for all, not just the lucky few. If ECEC programmes are to make a contribution to social inclusion by helping make equality of life chances and a basic level of well-being possible for all children, first and foremost children and families must have access to the right kinds of high-quality programmes.

For this to happen, governments must play a meaningful role in setting policy and providing funds. In 2000, UNICEF called on world government leaders to:

“Make children – the youngest most especially – the priority at all policy tables...and to ensure [that this has] the necessary financial and political support.” (UNICEF 2000)

Indeed, ECEC is considered by many to be an important child’s right. The 2000 United Nations’ Dakar Framework for Action, approved by 160 countries, made ‘expanding ECEC’ the first of six goals set out in UNESCO’s *Global Monitoring Report 2007. Strong foundations: Early childhood care and education* (UNESCO 2007).

Today, as many countries are increasingly culturally, racially and ethnically diverse, examples are available from countries with a variety of histories, cultures, fiscal capacities and political arrangements to show how the enabling public policy for socially inclusive ECEC programmes can be activated. These examples show that closing the inclusion gap requires vision, commitment, knowledge and the political will to turn aspirations into reality through transformative processes of policy and programme development.

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