ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Building a Human Rights argument for equity of inclusive early learning

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Introduction

Quality early learning is inclusive early learning. It ensures that each child, regardless of differences, culture, language, abilities or means, has full access to and meaningful participation in play-based environments with confident staff. It ensures that every early child educator is respected, with equity of opportunity and compensation for their work. Sadly, this is not the reality for many children and educators.[1] While the importance of early education is well recognized, a growing call for inclusion based on a human rights argument is emerging. It suggests a much broader articulation of inclusion, anchored in childcare regulations that align with Human Right Codes. This paper explores this conversation and discusses why it is increasingly critical to heed.

Subject

Equitable outcomes in early learning programs must be situated within contemporary understandings of diversity in a world increasingly defined by globalization, migration and

pluralism. Canada's evolution of inclusive education reflects international trends and shifting social norms, moving from segregation to integration that challenged stigmas and opened schools and classrooms to all children, regardless of individual needs. Today, legislation stipulates mandatory school attendance from ages 5 or 6, depending on the province or territory. Policies and practices are well entrenched for schools to accommodate individual differences and embrace families in collaborative planning and service delivery. While each system is rife with challenges, there is no debate about the legal right for every child to be fully included and engaged in public education. The early years, however, hold a different story.

Problems

Canada is a signatory to international Human Rights charters, which serve to defend against discrimination. These charters do not apply to children in early years programs, allowing centres to cherry-pick from wait lists and avoid children with perceived needs.[2] There is a growing call to align childcare regulations with United Nations conventions.[3]

Research Context

While the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreements have prioritized greater inclusion of marginalized children, implementation is uneven. Equity, diversity and inclusion are interwoven into the fabric of Canadian institutions and etched on nearly all public policies and practices. Canada prides itself in being a multi-cultural society with a constitution that centres on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.[4] Despite this, discrimination continues to flourish in most aspects of Canadian life,[5] fueled by rising political conservativism and populism.[6] Such discrimination commonly impacts both the children who attend early learning programs and the workforce that staffs them.[7]

Key Research Questions

1. What international policies and standards speak to inclusion during the early years?
2. How can a Human Rights argument for full inclusion during the early years be developed and established to influence early years policies and practices?

Research Results

A child's right to education is recognized by international conventions and documents, including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948)[8], the UNESCO *Convention against Discrimination in Education* (1960),[9] the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Chil*d (1989),[10] and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006).[11] Global education and development goals have been expressed in UNESCO's *Education for Al*l (1990),[12] *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Education* (1994),[13] the *Millennium Development Goals* (2000),[14] the *Sustainable Development Goals* (2015)[15] and the *Cali Commitment to Equity and Inclusion in Education* (2019).[16] These documents outline the human dignity of children, but they provide limited guidance in the actual implementation of policy protecting vulnerable populations.[17]

Increasingly, inclusion is shifting from mere placement in programs to recognition of a child's right to meaningful participation. In Europe, the *EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child* and the *European Child Guarantee* (2021) provides a new comprehensive EU policy framework to ensure the protection of the rights of all children and secure access to basic services for vulnerable children.[18] The EU specifically identified that a high-quality early learning program is inclusive of diversity.[19] The *European Child Guarantee* was adopted to ensure that every EU child at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to the most basic of rights like healthcare and education.[20] This *Guarantee* is based on the concept that universal access is vital for ensuring equity for all children, and in particular those who experience social exclusion due to poverty or other forms of disadvantage. A *European Pillar of Social Rights*[21] defines early learning as encompassing centre-based and family day care, privately and publicly funded, preschool and pre-primary provision, where every child has a fundamental right to affordable and inclusive early learning.

Ireland is one example of this, with a strong policy agenda for inclusive early learning through a whole-of-government strategy. It covers the years 2019-2028 and commits Ireland to improving access, affordability, and quality in early learning. The focus is on the professionalization of the ECE workforce, increased funding, and instituting curriculum and quality frameworks. A *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* [22,23] includes a set of inclusion principles as the basis for the development of teacher competencies and pedagogy. This includes specialized support and expertise through multi-disciplinary teams and greater connections with the school system, especially for marginalized populations.[24]

The EU has developed two main policy instruments and guides: a toolkit which includes a set of inclusive policy initiatives, practical solutions, and measures to inspire the creation of appropriate conditions to benefit all children and families[25]; and how to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff.[26]

A Human Rights argument for equity builds on 70 years of empirical research that settles any debate that the neural development of young children is facilitated by participation in quality early learning, with boosted literacy, language, behavioural regulation and social skills.[27] This impact is particularly evident in marginalized children, for whom equity is seldom attained. It dramatically lowers referral to special education programs and lessens the intensity of support for those children who will require accommodations and individualized planning.[28] It levels the playing field and readies children for life, improving long-term indicators such as high school completion, post-secondary participation, social determinants of health, income, and citizen engagement.[29] The outcome is greater equity.

Research Gaps

Despite the eloquence of these international standards for inclusion, Canadian children with individualized needs have little access to early years programs. Research must explore obstacles to access and tangible ways to remove them. The connection between research, policy and practice must establish the standards that Canada espouses - for *all* children, not just those protected by Education Acts.

Conclusions

A Human Rights perspective of inclusion during the early years implies equitable outcomes, as well as anti-discrimination policies for educators. Equity of access, equity of participation, and equity in the profession results in equity for society. The professional competency of early child educators, who historically have had little exposure to inclusive practices, depends on access to professional learning to ensure comfort and skill to understand, embrace and support inclusion. Diverse cultural practices, beliefs and languages become embraced and welcomed.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Positioning children on level playing fields is not just good for children, it is good for families, communities, society, and economies. Children enrolled in inclusive environments value diversity

and prioritize inclusive communities. Inclusion becomes the norm, and greater equity becomes the consequence.

Equity exists when every child, regardless of their needs, has full access with meaningful participation. Equity exists when every educator is free of discrimination or marginalization. It exists when no child is ever given the message of “you don’t belong because you are different” and when no mother must leave work to pick up their child because they’ve been excluded. Every educator feels secure, competent, confident, and enthused in caring for every child for exactly who - and how - they are in this world.

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