**The Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project**

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Host:

Welcome back to Handi-Link, sponsored by the Italian-Canadian Handicapable Association. I’m your host Cam Wells. Earlier in our show, we heard from Paralympic athlete Joshua Kennison and Disability Rights Promotion International researcher Emily McIntrye. In this segment of our show we’ll hear from Kathryn Underwood from Ryerson University who will be telling us a little bit about a project related to disabilities in early childhood. So tell me a little bit about your latest project concerning early childhood and disability.

Dr. Kathryn Underwood:

So this project is called the Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project and it’s a longitudinal study meaning we interview people over a period of time and the study is taking place in five communities in the province of Ontario. We’ve been talking to families about their experiences of interacting with a whole range of services starting from the age of 2 and as their children age into school.

Host:

So, what are some of the most common barriers to service?

Dr. Kathryn Underwood:

Well we aren’t specifically looking at barriers to service, what we’re interested in is how the interactions that families have with institutions leads to the ways in which they think about disability in early childhood. So one of the things that we’ve found is that many of the services require a diagnosis or a designation in order for families to access those services so we know that when that is a requirement for service then families spend a lot of time trying to get that diagnosis and of course, the experience of getting a diagnosis means many things to different people, but one of the things that it can do is to reinforce a medicalized way or a pathological way of thinking about disability and childhood, rather than a more holistic way of thinking about childhood. We also find that leads to service providers such as early childhood educators or schoolteachers feeling that they can only support children when those children have a diagnosis but until there is a diagnosis they won’t know how to take care of those children and we don’t think that that’s actually true. We think that there’s a lot of things you can do to support children whether they have a diagnosis or not.

Host:

Wow. One of the key things in that is just because a child has a diagnosis doesn’t mean that every educator is going to understand every symptom related to it.

Dr. Kathryn Underwood:

Of course and nor should they have to because sometimes as we know that for all children there is many things about a child that a teacher or an early childhood educator won’t know but they can still serve that child very well even without having all of the information.

Host:

So what was the inspiration behind this project?

Dr. Kathryn Underwood:

It actually came from a previous study. This project was designed in collaboration with a number of partners so the project was first supported by Wellington County and in addition to Ryerson University where I work. Also the District of Temiskaming in Northern Ontario, the City of Toronto and the City of Hamilton. Those communities came together and based on a previous study where we had heard from families that there was a lack of information about access to what they called special needs services. We wanted to explore that further so it was together that we designed this study and thought about the kinds of questions that we wanted to ask and we think this study is a little bit different from other studies because we’re not only interested in developmental outcomes for children, we’re actually interested in studying how institutional responses to disability are constructed in early childhood from the viewpoints of families.

Host:

So if you could send any one message about the need for a project like this and the awareness it could potentially bring, what would you say?

Dr. Kathryn Underwood:

I would say that, two things. One we need to rec…. You said one message but now I’m going to give you two [laughs]

Host:

It’s alright [laughs].

Dr. Kathryn Underwood:

I would say one of the messages is that it’s really important to know just how much is being asked of families. They are doing an awful lot of the work of this early years service system. So sometimes we think that the govern- we know that the government spends money on these programs and the government’s policies are all about how they design these programs, thinking about their budget and their staffing compliments and how much space they need but often it’s ver- it goes unrecognized just how much of the work is being done by families. So that’s one thing that I think needs to be much better understood and then the second thing is just how this system is creating, is constructing the identity of young children as disabled and that in the adult disability community we actually have some ways of thinking about disability that are very positive related to the culture of disability, the collective impact of disabled people but we have almost no ways our society thinks about disability in positive ways for very young children and I think we really need to work harder at that.

Host:

So, what are the next steps in the project?

Dr. Kathryn Underwood:

We- this project has been a three year we’ve done three years of data collection, it’s a five year project but we’re in our last year of the project. We have recently submitted an application to get additional funding to continue with the project so that we can follow the same families up until their children are in grade three and also to do a new recruitment so that we can learn from more families and also expand to other provinces and territories. So we’re looking to expand to Manitoba, British Columbia, and the Northwest Territories.

Host:

I’d like to thank you for taking the time out to do this but if you can stay on the line for a sec that would be great.

Dr. Kathryn Underwood:

Okay.