

# Policy Brief No. 1: An Introduction to the IECSS Project (December 2014)

## **The Inclusive Early Childhood Service System Project (IECSS)**

This document summarizes discussions from a Research Planning Event that took place on May 5th and 6th at Ryerson University, in Toronto. The event brought together academic, policy, and community experts from Wellington, Hamilton, Timiskaming, and Toronto, to explore community and provincial knowledge and research needs regarding how children with disabilities are affected by early childhood policy changes and services. The event was the first time that representatives from these four geographic areas came together in one room to plan for the Inclusive Early Childhood Service System Project (IECSS). These four geographic areas were selected to be part of this research project because of their experience in research, and their expertise in inclusive practices.

At the Research Planning Event there were representatives from the domains of child care, early intervention, social service planning, and research. Organisations that practice in these domains using Indigenous values also participated. The researchers represented municipal social policy, disability studies, nursing, and early childhood studies. The Research Planning Event participants expressed a resounding view that there is a need for research on the ways that integrated early childhood education and care services are meeting the needs of children with disabilities in Ontario.

*This is the first in a series of policy briefs that will be prepared as part of the IECSS Project.*

## **Early Childhood Education Policy**

In 2004, the province of Ontario launched an initiative to ensure children in Ontario would have the “best start” in life (Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS), 2006). Best Start included initiatives for provincial ministries to work together with municipalities to plan for the expansion of licensed child care spaces, integration of services for young children and their families, earlier identification of children’s developmental needs, and increased investments in services for children with special needs. Since the Best Start initiative, the early years system has been affected by many new policy directives including Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten (FDELK) (Office of the Premier, 2009), Modernization of Child Care (2012), Child and Family Centres (Brotten & Pascal, 2011), and the Early Years Policy Framework (2013). In addition to changes in the overall structure of early childhood education and care, there are also changes to services that are specific to children with disabilities, including: speech and language services (Early Years Policy Framework, 2013), autism services (MCYS, 2012), children’s mental health services (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012), and the Ontario Special Needs Strategy (2014).

While these policy frameworks show promise for stronger population-wide resources, quality data collection and analysis have not been a consistent part of the provincial policy domain and are therefore taken up in local communities. Local communities have become responsible for planning, funding approaches, developing goals and objectives, defining roles and responsibilities, collaboration, and sustainability. Local partners face challenges in implementing these policies without clear directives on how to meet the needs of children with disabilities and their families.

### **Policy Implication #1**

Ontario needs a clear and comprehensive province-wide policy mandate that directs and supports inclusion of children with disabilities in all early childhood education and care sectors

### **A system that is integrated and inclusive of children with disabilities**

Greater integration among services for children and families has been a focus of each of the provincial policy frameworks. Research in three Best Start demonstration communities found that parents believe there are not enough programs for children with disabilities and that the programs that do exist are not responsive enough to family needs (Underwood & Killoran, 2012). The new policies have municipalities across Ontario seeking ways to move towards greater service integration

For children with disabilities changes in policy have resulted in a shifting context for their full participation and inclusion in high quality early childhood programs. Yet, there has been little strategic attention to how new organizational structures may affect access to and true participation in programs. At the Research Planning Event, participants wondered if the emphasis on integration distorts our understanding of the affects that these widespread policy changes are having on children with disabilities and their families. We suspect the integration of the service system is being perceived as the most essential goal among early childhood policies rather than as a tool for achieving the goal of inclusive services and programs.

### **Policy Implication #2**

The service experiences of children with disabilities can illuminate challenges with service integration across the system for all children and families.

### **Children with disabilities are underrepresented in early childhood system evaluations**

Children with disabilities are often underrepresented or excluded in mainstream studies about child development (Feldman et al. 2012). As the province engages in evaluation

of the implementation of FDELK children with disabilities continue to be underrepresented.

In a Ministry of Education sponsored evaluation of FDELK, researchers found children with special needs scored higher on social competence and emotional maturity in non-FDELK programs than in full day programs. Researchers were not able to determine which characteristics of the program contributed to social competence and emotional maturity (Vanderlee, Youmans, Peters & Eastabrook, 2012). However, with the implementation of FDELK, many kindergarten programs lost Educational Assistants who had been an important part of the team working with children with special needs.

### **Policy Implication #3**

There must be a clear policy and evaluation strategy in place in Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten to support inclusion of children with disabilities and integration with community early childhood programs.

### **Need for research**

Since the span of the early years involves a transition period between child care and school, age specific data regarding children with disabilities is vital to delivering integrated and comprehensive services. Recently, People for Education reported that 50% of elementary principals had at some point recommended students with special needs not attend school for the full day (GallagherMacKay & Kidder, 2014). Without precise age data, they are unclear how many of the children turned away fall into the early years age group. None the less, the finding recalls the Killoran, Tymon, and Frempong (2007) study of Toronto Preschools where the majority of supervisors stated that they would exclude a child on the basis of an individual characteristic. Unfortunately, neither of these studies explored the issue of exclusion from the perspective of families or the children themselves.

Children with disabilities should not be treated as one unified group. There is a need for research that examines the cultural and social context for disablement. The Inclusive Early Childhood Service System Project includes several partners who deliver early childhood services from a First Nations and/or Métis perspective. These team members have noted the following:

1. Indigenous knowledge is foundational to social policies that respect the right to self-determination.
2. The historical context and the complex relationship between First Nations and Métis service systems, children, and their families and the intergenerational trauma which influences some families to not trust service providers must be understood.
3. Current policies make references to aboriginal communities and children with special needs without specific details about who these communities are and how they will design and deliver new programs and policies.

The rights of people experiencing disability have often been conceived of as individual rights. However, given that some ethnic and cultural communities have been historically overrepresented in special education, it is critical that the study adopts a lens through which the collective rights of historically marginalized communities are also honoured. In particular, children from racialized communities are much more likely to have poor health and developmental outcomes, and to be accessing specialized supports (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

The principles of universal design posit that environments should be structured in ways that are inclusive to all individuals regardless of ability or disability (Darragh, 2007). In order for children with disabilities to experience inclusion, effective early childhood services need to be well coordinated and focus on the family and local community, with the child's needs at the centre (Irwin, Siddiqi & Hertzman, 2007). With theoretical and ideological foundations in the social model of disability and universal design, policies that address the needs of children with disabilities and their families can better ensure inclusion across early childhood education and care services. Perhaps most importantly, it is our position that policy directives which acknowledge the unique experiences of children with disabilities will ensure higher quality programs for all children.

#### **Policy Implication #4**

Provincial policies should be grounded in the principles of universal design and individual difference should be considered in policy development, implementation, and ongoing policy reviews.

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