

Can early childhood education and care help keep Canada's promise of respect for diversity? ^[1]

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Summary:

The idea that learning in early childhood establishes the foundation for cognitive and social development and lifelong learning has a substantial and well established knowledge base. There is also evidence that early childhood before children have had a chance to form negative ideas about difference - is a prime time for learning positive ideas about tolerance and respect for diversity. This suggests that it is expedient for modern societies - especially extremely diverse societies like Canada - to ensure the wide availability of environments in which preschool-age children have the best possible opportunities to develop these positive ideas. In this context, robust public policy frameworks that support early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs that are: accessible to all children, inclusive and responsive to diverse ethnic and racial groups, and use effective approaches to learning to respect diversity are not only practical but essential.

Canada is one of the world's most diverse countries with national policy that articulates respect for diversity, establishing a rights-based framework for multiculturalism and anti-racism. However, strategies for ensuring that these policies are more than rhetoric are not well established especially where young children are concerned. Canada has generally been considered a "success story" with regard to diversity but its social safety net and the resources needed to ensure that social exclusion and inequity are not barriers to a tolerant equitable society are relatively weak and have been eroded in the last decade.

Based on what is known about how young children learn, universally accessible ECEC programs that incorporate social inclusion can play a key role in building a foundation of respect for diversity by capitalizing on children's receptivity to these ideas about diversity in the early years. But ECEC programs are poorly developed in Canada, with only a minority of preschool-age children accessing services before age five when part-time kindergarten becomes widely available. Although there is interest among early childhood education experts and researchers in ECEC's potential for strengthening social inclusion, respect for diversity and equity among social classes, racial and ethnic groups and classes, Canada's diffuse ECEC policy goals and fragmented policy and service delivery limit the possibilities.

The focus of this paper is on the role that public policy could play in positioning ECEC programs to contribute to realization of Canada's promise of respect for diversity. It describes the context of Canadian diversity and the policy context and situation of Canadian early childhood programs, emphasizing the potential role that robust, well-focused public ECEC policy and programs could play in a very diverse country like Canada.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: diversity ^[4]

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