
Book Reviews Recensions

***A Matter of Urgency:
Including Children with Special Needs in Child Care in Canada***

Sharon Hope Irwin, Donna S. Lero, and Kathleen Brophy,
Wreck Cove, Nova Scotia: Breton Books. 214 pages

Reviewed by Susan Baines

A Matter of Urgency: Including Children with Special Needs in Child Care in Canada, written by Sharon Hope Irwin, Donna S. Lero, and Kathleen Brophy, presents a compelling case for quality, accessible child care. The goal of this work is stated in the introduction: to develop in depth understanding of the ecology of inclusive child care in Canada and to use that knowledge to promote more effective inclusion on a daily basis. What follows is a thorough analysis of what would constitute quality inclusive daycare and child care and what steps need to be taken to realize that goal. Clear methodology, a thorough literature review, and well stated philosophy provide an excellent overview of the current state of child care in Canada including care for children with special needs. Effective techniques and strategies for including children with special needs are examined from the perspective of the child care staff, centre directors, and travelling resource teachers and resource consultants. The relationship between effective inclusion and high quality child care is explored in this text, which results in the conclusion that the two concepts are inextricably linked. Recommendations are succinct and strong, bringing the reader full circle from the conclusion back to the title, an urgent call for action at a policy level as well as at a community level.

It is a disheartening truth that there has been little progress made in child care in thirty years—the authors call this scenario, “a staggering reality.” The book begins by assessing quality daycare in terms of its importance for family health, community health, healthy child development, and family economic well being. It quickly becomes apparent that the current policy unfairly segregates children along socio-economic lines negatively impacting families with children with special needs. The authors state openly that diversity is essential for peace and

health, backing this philosophy with clear argument and rationale. Then they go on to inform us that the United States is leading Canada in protective legislation for persons with disabilities, another shocking truth. Programs and services for children with special needs really only began in both countries in the 1960s. In the U.S., the Handicapped Children's Early Education Act was passed and the Head Start program was started. In Canada, the development of programs for children with special needs parallels the development of the public school system. Unlike in the United States, where with legislation, funding, research and development, education and training were initiated, in Canada, volunteers handled the work of developing and running programs for children with special needs. In terms of inclusion, Canada continues to follow the lead and direction of the United States.

The literature review notes that research in the 1970s and 1980s asked the question, "Should children with special needs be included in child care and preschool programs?" By the 1980's, evaluation tools for daycare began to include questions about inclusiveness: "How can children with special needs best be included in child care and preschool programs?" One of the most important variables determining successful inclusion identified by this research was staff attitude. Others include the nature of the child's disability, staff education and training, staff's experience working with children with special needs, the confidence of the staff, availability of resources, collaboration of parents, and the leadership approach used by the early childhood director. Research on the subject of inclusion in early education is very limited, and due to the radically different policy contexts in the United States and Canada, the U.S. literature that touches on the topic of preschool inclusion is often not relevant. The result of the review is that although inclusiveness has increased, it still has a long way to go.

The way that inclusion is understood and experienced by child care staff, the directors of centres as well as travelling resource teachers and resource consultants, provides important insights into their different locations within the provision of services. Findings, gathered by questionnaire, confirm the extent to which many early childhood professionals continue to extend themselves beyond their initial education and training and even beyond the resources available to them to meet the needs of all children and families in their communities. Childcare staff were as positive about including children with severe and complex conditions. They were also in favor of fully including children with lesser challenges such as children with serious behaviour problems as long as there was adequate support staff available. According to child care staff, the only reason to not include children is a deficiency of adequate resources rather than any other factor or particular disorder. In the directors case, they were clear on the barriers or factors that limit or frustrate inclusion: expectations that are not matched by resources to support inclusion and cutbacks and the lack of government leadership to maintain and build on, rather than erode, the basic quality of child care programs. Ongoing budget cuts have

limited these programs' capacities to contribute effectively to the goals of early intervention and prevention and to the overall promotion of healthy child development. The external resource professionals (travelling teachers, etc.) noted that caseloads and complexity of the caseloads continue to increase. They also noted an increase in the stress levels of staff and parents. These resource professionals state that required competencies are increasing without complimentary increases in time for training, planning, etc.

High quality child care and other early childhood development programs have positive benefits for children with special needs, for their parents, for other children, for child care staff, and for the community. However, the participation of children with special needs is limited by a number of factors, some that are general to child care and others that are specific to the inclusion of children with special needs. Twenty-two recommendations are presented in the areas of legislation, policy development, funding, creating appropriate training, developing inclusive practices, information, and public education. In summing up, the authors state that we need a "right to care" no matter what the circumstances. They clarify the foundational relationship between effective inclusion and high quality child care. And they sound the call that we need strong political leadership in this area now. It is a "Matter of Urgency."