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

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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.

I. Introduction

Cultural and racial diversity is a fact of life today even in countries that were once much more homogeneous. Conflicts that have issues of diversity or difference at their core are nothing new in human history. But as conflicts between culturally or racially diverse groups have escalated into internecine warfare in countries as different from one another as Northern Ireland, Kosovo and Rwanda, they raise what is probably an age-old question "How can this be prevented?"

The idea that early childhood is a critical time for establishing the foundation for cognitive and social development has become well established among the general public as well as among child development experts (See, for example, Barnett, 2008 for a recent summary of the research evidence about the effects of early childhood programs, or see Camilli, Sadak, Ryan, and Barnett, 2010). There is also good evidence that early childhood – before children have had a chance to form negative ideas about difference and "us" and "them" – can be a prime time for learning about and developing positive ideas about tolerance and respect for diversity. Connelly comments on the "hundreds of experimental studies dating back to the 1920" that not only show that children as young as age two may be aware of racial or visible differences between people but that research shows as well that three year olds may attribute negative attributes to "other" ethnic groups who may not be visibly different (2007:50). From this perspective, it is in the self-interest of diverse societies to make use of the best available knowledge about efficacious ways to ensure that diversity is understood and appreciated by incorporating best practices into policy frameworks and early childhood programming.

Early childhood education and care programs[1] (ECEC) are one of the key locales outside the home for preschool learning, so ECEC programs are typically a main focus of interest among researchers and practitioners interested in early childhood and diversity. Friendly and Lero (2002) point out that ECEC programs can be good sites for social inclusion and learning about diversity for parents as well as for children; inclusive ECEC services that are responsive to the community can unite families from diverse origins through common activities related to their children, acting as a central point for building social cohesion.

Canada is an especially interesting country to consider with regard to diversity and early childhood for two main reasons, first, merely because it is so diverse – linguistically, culturally and increasingly, racially. Canada was a heterogeneous country even before European colonizers began to arrive in the 1600s, as the original Aboriginal inhabitants, or First Nations, organized themselves into multiple nations. In the 21st century, Canada has become one of the most diverse countries in the world with immigration, especially by non-Europeans, the primary source of population growth (Statistics Canada, 2008). And - as Banting, Courchene and Seidle point out - unlike countries where there are only a few in-migrating groups, Canada's population comes from multiple parts of the world, creating what they have called "diverse diversity" made up of many ethnicities, races and religions (2007).

A second main point of interest that makes Canadian diversity interesting is that – while few would argue that it is free of racism and inequality - widespread blatant discrimination is not as evident as it is in some other

[1] Early childhood education and care programs in Canada comprise regulated child care (mostly privately-delivered fee-paying programs primarily for working parents of children 0-12 years outside regular school hours); kindergarten (an educational program usually publicly-delivered and 2.5 hours a day, which does not become available until age five in most of Canada); nursery schools (privately-delivered, fee-paying educational programs, usually 2.5 hours a day for three and four year olds).

countries. A central feature of the Canadian approach to diversity is that since the 1960s there has been a body of official policy that has evolved to situate respect for diversity as a key Canadian value and accorded the concept official status. From this perspective, some would suggest that respect for diversity is almost a "given" in Canada, at least officially.

However, while overt discrimination may be neither epidemic nor acceptable and Canada is typically not conflict-ridden, many migrants to Canada, racialized groups and Aboriginal people must struggle for adequate living conditions, education, suitable employment, recognition and respect. There is strong recognition that "on the ground", Canada has not adequately addressed key social issues such as poverty and discrimination that are linked to diversity, immigration and race, especially in the last decade or so as social programs have been eroded. Child poverty has remained stubbornly high over the past 20 years (Campaign 2000, 2008) and the gap between rich and poor – with newcomers to Canada and visible minorities disproportionately in the low income sector – has widened (OECD, 2008). Although the discourse on immigration and diversity has for some years used the language of "shared citizenship" and has generally been considered to be a "success story", today many commentators point to cracks in Canada's approach to multiculturalism (Stein et al, 2007). Perhaps most significantly, few people would suggest that Canada's utter failure to address adequately the dispossessed situation of its original Aboriginal people could in any way be called a "success story".

From this perspective, while addressing diversity issues may start with articulating official policy, a well-woven social safety net of justice, employment, settlement services, training, education, health, housing, and income security is fundamental to ensure that the aims of official diversity-focused policy are met (Friendly, 2007). As a key part of the safety net, inclusive well-designed early

childhood education and care programs (ECEC) for young children and their families are central as these play multiple vital roles for both children and adults – healthy child development through early childhood education, support for parental employment, training and education, a means for reducing or alleviating poverty, and are a critical component of women's equality. Although all these roles are important for all families regardless of their class, ethnic or racial background, perhaps most important from the perspective of diversity is that ECEC programs also have the capacity to be a main vehicle for providing environments in which young children can develop positive ideas about diversity as a foundation for lifelong tolerance and acceptance of difference.

This paper provides a snapshot of the social context of diversity in Canada and public policy relevant to ECEC programs for young children at national and provincial levels. It uses the term "diversity" to mean ethnic, cultural and racial diversity, recognizing that issues of ability/disability and gender/sexual orientation are important as well. It is important as well to recognize that some ethno-cultural, linguistic and racial issues are especially complicated in Canada, in particular, how issues regarding how people in Quebec and Aboriginal people are positioned in the discourse. This means that in the Canadian context of diversity, neither Quebecers nor Aboriginal people are ordinarily willing to be relegated to the status of a cultural, ethnic or racial group among other groups. Where young children and early childhood issues are concerned, however, issues regarding Aboriginal children are often included in considerations of respect for diversity; ethno-cultural and cultural and linguistic issues pertaining to francophone children and families outside Quebec may be included as well. This paper generally follows this approach.

II. "A diverse diversity"

That nearly 20% of people living in Canada were reported in 2006 Census data to speak a non-official language as their mother tongue and that more than 200 languages were reported as mother tongue languages illustrates how diverse Canada's diversity is (Statistics Canada, 2007). From the beginning, Canada was formed by, and continues to be formed by, waves of newcomers who have made it one of the most diverse countries in the world. Canada was first inhabited by people who had themselves come as settlers from Asia. The territory of the First Nations was colonized in the 1600s when French settlers began to establish permanent communities in Quebec, followed by an army of English-speaking refugees from the American War of Independence (1776). British rule became dominant in the mid 1700s following the Battle of Quebec. Other Europeans came to settle beginning in the 1700s, followed by black Americans fleeing slavery via the Underground Railroad in the mid 1800s. It wasn't until around 1900 that large numbers of European immigrants, solicited by government advertising as good candidates for homesteading the West began to arrive. At the same time, Chinese migrants who came to build the first railway across Canada were subjected to punitive and discriminatory treatment. After World War II, came a massive influx of new, mostly European immigrants. A century after Canada's official founding in 1867, the population which had been British (60%) and French in origin (30%) had dropped to 40% and 27% respectively by 1981 (Statistics Canada, 2008).

Thus it has been through 400 years of immigration that Canada has become a highly diverse country and the numbers of immigrants and refugees coming to Canada each year remains high. As immigration policy officially became less racially and ethnically discriminatory in the 1960s, immigrants'

countries of origin have shifted away from Europe (although many Eastern Europeans came to Canada after the fall of the Soviet Union) towards Asia and Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, the Indian sub-continent, Africa, and South and Central America. Between 2001 and 2006, there were immigrants from more than 200 different places of birth, with newcomers from China, India, Pakistan, Korea and the Philippines making up more than 35% of the total (Statistics Canada, 2007). Newcomers to Canada chiefly reside in the large urban centres - the greater Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver areas but continued high immigration means that ethnic and racial diversity has become a fact of life in smaller cities and towns in all regions of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2007). Canadians are generally supportive of Canada's high levels of immigration; a 2008 public opinion poll found that 73% of Canadians (a smaller percent in Quebec) agreed that attracting immigrants to Canada is important in national-building (Nanos, 2008).

The Government of Canada's official policies that encompass multiculturalism, immigration and anti-racism set the tone and the framework for Canadian approaches to diversity. While there is no recognition of young children (and very little mention of children at all) in official policy and in federal programs, federal policy related to diversity is a key foundational element in the Canadian context that appears at some level to have an impact on how diversity issues involving young children are addressed. Until 1947, assimilation was the official approach to diversity but the influx of post- World War II immigrants, together with growing Québec nationalism and Aboriginal assertiveness, led to the national government's consideration of bilingualism, biculturalism, and, eventually, multiculturalism. The 1971 Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism led to the first official policy on multiculturalism. The 1971 federal policy on multiculturalism established the idea of government responsibility for

assisting cultural groups to "retain and foster their identity" and overcome barriers to full participation in Canadian society. This policy promoted and funded programs with these aims such as, for example, federally-funded "heritage language" programs operated in elementary schools and other locales[2].

The 1982 introduction of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was a significant rights-based step in the history of approaches to diversity in Canada. The Charter of Rights directs interpretation of the Charter "in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canada", defines the characteristics that are disallowed as grounds for discrimination (gender[3], culture, ethnicity, religion and race) are specified and recognizes and affirms the historical and treaty rights of Aboriginal peoples (Sections 27, 15 and 35, Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982).

In the 1980s, the growing number of visible minority immigrants shifted the focus of official multiculturalism as race became an increasingly important issue. This had an impact on development of the 1988 *Multiculturalism Act*, the world's first national legislation on multiculturalism and the standing legislative framework for Canadian multiculturalism. This legislation is important because it acknowledges in law that multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society. It also "seeks to assist in preserving culture and language, reducing discrimination, and promoting culturally sensitive institutional change" at the federal level of government. Funds for a variety of federal programs for race relations and cross-cultural understanding became available at this time but were diminished during the 1990s, which also saw reduction of social programs, and a diminishing role for the federal government in social policy generally.

[2] Tavares (2000) traces the history of these programs and points out that the terminology has changed from "heritage" to "international" languages

[3] Gender was included in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms only after protests by women's groups.

Canada's Action Plan against Racism, released in 2005, makes the sole mention of children among the federal government's diversity policies, identifying "children and youth" (not young children) in the *Plan.* While there is no recognition of young children (and very little mention of children at all) in official policy and in federal programs, federal policy related to diversity is a key foundational element in the Canadian context that appears at some level to have an impact on how diversity issues involving young children are addressed.

In Quebec, the concept of multiculturalism is designated 'interculturalism'; diversity is tolerated and encouraged but within a framework that maintains the supremacy of the French culture of Quebec. This position was affirmed as recently as 2007 by a Quebec commission addressing issues of diversity and difference (Bouchard and Taylor, 2008).

III. The state of early childhood education and care in Canada

Friendly and Lero have used Amartya Sens' conception of social inclusion to describe how well-designed childhood education and care services can contribute to social inclusion in society, arguing that socially inclusive societies are those in which members participate meaningfully and actively, have varied opportunities for joining in collective experiences, share social experiences, and attain fundamental well-being, equality of life chances and a basic level of well-being (2002). This paper takes the position that Canada's ECEC policy and programs are not currently well developed, well financed, widely enough available or coherent enough to meet their potential for ensuring that Canada is a socially inclusive society or that official commitments to a very diverse population are met.

Canada's early childhood education and care situation was reviewed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as part of a 20 country Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care between 1998 and 2006. The OECD's report on Canada observed that,

> it is clear that national and provincial policy for the early education and care of young children in Canada is still in its initial stages. Care and education are still treated separately and coverage is low compared to other OECD countries. Over the coming years, significant energies and funding will need to be invested in the field to create a universal system in tune with the needs of a full employment economy, with gender equity and with new understandings of how young children develop and learn. (OECD, 2004: 6).

The OECD report on Canada also noted that:

> In 2001, immigrants accounted for 18.3% of Canada's total population. Many immigrants have young children and almost two thirds of the children who came to Canada between 1997 and 1999 spoke neither English nor French. In some kindergarten classes in Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal, more than 50% of the students were born outside Canada and most of these children came from Asia, the Middle East or Africa. Increasingly, staff in child care programs and kindergarten classes assist children who are learning English or French adapt to what may be very different norms and expectations. Neither the kindergarten nor child care workforce reflects the cultural and racial diversity of the population as a whole. Training programs for teachers and for early childhood educators are under pressure to specifically prepare their students for working in a situation of ethno cultural diversity.
>
> Thirty-five percent of the Aboriginal population is under age 15. Compared to the population as a whole, the Aboriginal population is educationally disadvantaged. Over the past decade, the federal government has introduced a number of new ECEC services for Aboriginal children under age 6 both on and off

> reserve and increased financial support. Aboriginal organizations often express a strong desire to maintain their culture and for ECEC services that are culturally sensitive, reflecting Aboriginal cultural norms and practices (OECD, 2004: pp. 86-87).

It has long been observed that early childhood education and care in Canada suffers from a mix of problems. Friendly and Prentice (2009) observe that "care" is divided administratively, financially and programmatically from early childhood education; there are severe shortages of child care places, especially for infants, school-age children, children with special needs, Aboriginal, rural and remote communities; high user fees make regulated child care too costly for ordinary families; program quality in regulated child care programs is, according to the available research, more likely to be poor or mediocre than "excellent"; schedules do not coincide with parents' work lives, particularly kindergarten, which is not sensitive to the labour force needs of parents and is available for only a minority of preschool-aged children. Overall, no region of Canada provides a system of well-designed, integrated and adequately funded early childhood education and care services to meet the needs of a majority of families and children. As a majority of mothers of children in this age group are in the paid labour force (77% with youngest child aged 3 – 5 years; 69% with youngest child aged 0 – 3 years in 2007), most preschool-age children are presumed to be looked after in unregulated, privately-funded, privately-arranged child care (Beach, Friendly, Ferns, Prabhu and Forer, 2009).

One of the most germane things about Canada's early childhood education and care situation is that – although the past two decades have been an era in which participation in the paid labour force became the norm for mothers of young children and the knowledge about the benefits of quality early childhood programs for young children has accumulated – it has failed to

progress significantly. International comparative studies such as the OECD's Thematic Review of ECEC care indicate that while in most developed countries "policy makers have recognized that equitable access to quality early childhood education and care can strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning for all children and support the broad educational and social needs of families" (OECD, 2001: 7) from a comparative perspective, Canada's ECEC has fallen farther and farther behind. Canada's ECEC provision was ranked at the very bottom[4] of 25 affluent countries by UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre in 2008, achieving only one of a possible ten benchmarks for accessible, high quality early childhood education and child care (UNICEF, 2008). In a shorthand sense, the Canadian ECEC situation can be described as "too little money, too little policy".

From a governance perspective, Canada is a relatively weak federation, with health, education and social programs constitutionally defined as provincial (sub-national) responsibilities. There is no national ECEC program or policy framework; each of Canada's ten provinces and three territories has developed its own approach to providing multiple ECEC programs – full-day child care, nursery schools and kindergarten. In each province/territory, an assortment of ECEC programs is provided through multiple departments and authorities. These include child care centres and regulated family child care homes intended to provide "care" while parents are working or studying and kindergartens and nursery schools whose main purpose is early childhood education. Although ECEC is primarily a provincial responsibility, none of the provinces or territories provides universal access to high quality programs. The federal government offers an assortment of ECEC programs for populations for whom it has special responsibility (newcomers taking federal language programs, military families

[4] Canada tied with Ireland for last place, each meeting one benchmark.

and Aboriginal families). ECEC programs under federal aegis are as incoherent and piecemeal as those of the provinces; for example, there are as many as seven different federal ECEC programs for Aboriginal children under three federal departments. (For more detailed information about provincial, territorial and federal ECEC programs and policy, see Beach et al, 2009).

At a practical level, this means that in most of Canada until age five, there is no ECEC program which just about all children attend[5]. Indeed, there are few good options that both provide early learning opportunities for children and meet parents' needs for child care while they're working, training or studying. Kindergarten is 2 ½ hours/day or alternating days or, at best, covers the full school-day. Regulated child care programs are not only limited in availability but the limited and baffling funding arrangements mean that parent fees must cover program costs, pricing regulated child care out of reach for families across the economic spectrum. This extends to poor, modest and middle income families, most of whom are not eligible for the provinces' outdated fee subsidy systems. At the same time, research shows that the quality of many of Canada's chronically under-funded regulated child care programs, which have difficulty attracting and retaining qualified staff, is not high enough to be called truly "educational" or "developmental".

While most families with young children are affected in various ways by Canada's ECEC situation, ECEC is – for a variety of reasons - even less accessible for some segments of the population. Among these are the low to modest income segment, where – increasingly – immigrant and visible minority Canadians are found, and Aboriginal Canadians, who are especially disadvantaged wherever they live. The OECD's research noted that few young Aboriginal children had

[5] Ontario provides universal public kindergarten for virtually all four year olds – the sole province/territory to do so.

access to high quality early childhood education and care programs and that an estimated 90 percent of Aboriginal children do not have access to regulated infant or early childhood programs with any Aboriginal component (2004).

IV. The pieces of an early years strategy for social inclusion and respect for diversity

While ECEC has enormous potential for strengthening social inclusion and respect for diversity, in Canada the potential is impeded in a variety of ways. The premise of this paper is that it is in the interest of diverse societies like Canada to ensure that environments in which preschool-age children have the best possible opportunities for developing respect for diversity are widely accessible. In this context, an early years strategy for social inclusion and respect for diversity should include:

1. A strong public policy framework that ensures that all children can access early childhood education and care programs;
2. ECEC programs that are widely inclusive and responsive to diverse groups;
3. Incorporation of best practices that encourage learning to respect diversity in the early years.

Moreno and van Dongen point out, "service delivery for early childhood across the board is a prerequisite for social inclusion" (2007: 3). From this perspective, because access to ECEC programs is so limited in Canada, much of the potential that ECEC programs have to contribute to young children's receptivity to positive ideas about diversity is missed. The policy framework to support universal access is limited and fragmented, with no commitment to universal access to ECEC before age five. A strategy for moving ECEC programs

to a place where they could meet their social inclusion potential would include building a long-term strategy for a universal ECEC system. With the evidence about best policy practices in mind, a robust policy framework would need to include key new directions for implementation including integration of child care, kindergarten and nursery schools into a new "seamless day" system administered by one provincial ministry, preferably the education ministry, with universal access as a goal.

At the same time, it is hard to consider ECEC programs that are limited - as child care is in Canada - by reliance on user fees and funding arrangements targeted to "the needy" as socially inclusive. By their very nature, these funding arrangements set up a situation that cannot help but be exclusionary. The failure to provide adequate public funding means dividing families by their ability to pay, by the nature of parental employment/non-employment, by family characteristics and by geographic region. Introducing a scheme for public funding of ECEC programs is a prerequisite for an ECEC situation with social inclusion as an objective. For Canada, which spends only an estimated 0.25% of GDP on public funding for ECEC programs, a reasonable financial goal would be the minimum benchmark of 1% of GDP set by UNICEF (2008).

Another key policy element that limits the social inclusion potential of ECEC in Canada is associated with the role of government: Canada – like the other liberal welfare states (the US, the UK, Australia, Ireland) – uses a private marketized approach to child care services[6]. This means that child care is not publicly-initiated, publicly-managed or publicly-maintained. Rather than a public planning approach, services are developed by parent groups, the voluntary sector and entrepreneurs who usually determine when and where

[6] Kindergarten is almost always a public program delivered by local education authorities but is usually only a part-day for five year olds.

services will be set up and maintained, so long as they meet provincial regulations. This is by its very nature inequitable; those most likely not to be in a position to be able to spend time and resources developing services, or even know how to go about it, are newcomers and low income families. And as many newcomers and visible minority Canadians now live in suburbs that lack the infrastructure of long-time established social agencies more likely to be found in older cities, child care programs in these areas are few and far between and are often delivered on a for-profit basis[7]. Overall, a privatized market-based approach to ECEC – like Canada's – makes ECEC a poor vehicle for social inclusion.

A final piece of an early years strategy for social inclusion and respect for diversity would be incorporation of effective approaches to learning to respect diversity into ECEC programs. Canada has no national ECEC curriculum framework nor do any of the provinces have a coherent approach for ECEC across the various programs, although there is increasing interest in moving in this direction. A number of Connelly's "important lessons" (2007) learned from research on young children and diversity are reflected in current work on provincial ECEC curriculum frameworks in Canada. Connolly's idea that a single rigid curricular approach will be ineffective for engaging with diverse communities is reflected in provincial curriculum framework developments[8] which specify social inclusion and respect for diversity as key specific principles. These all emphasize the importance of responsiveness to diverse communities. Initiated by provincial governments and developed through collaboration of ECEC experts, researchers and practitioners, curriculum frameworks from three provinces emphasize the importance of responding to local communities.

[7] Research supports the idea that child care operated on a profit making basis generally offers poorer quality than public or non-profit programs – see Cleveland et all, 2007.

[8] Ontario, British Columbia and New Brunswick

Connelly identifies a second lesson with resonance for Canadian ECEC: the importance of regarding children as socially competent active learners and the importance of "innovative and imaginative ways of engaging" with them (Connelly, 2007: 51). Although a strong "school readiness" pull from the US has been prominent in Canada as a rationale for "investment" in young children[9], among the ECEC community there is an active counter insistence that ECEC systems should be built upon the more rights-based understanding that children are active learners and social beings, engaged, eager to explore, competent, and capable of sustained activity and interests. Though not yet officially articulated as policy, this too is reflected in recently-developed provincial ECEC curriculum frameworks (Langford, in press). Connelly's final resonant lesson is the importance of "meaningful engagement" with parents and the local community. This idea has been articulated in Canada in a variety of ways including community control through community-based not-for-profit ownership of child care programs (Prentice, 2001; Chudnovsky, 2001), in research (Bernhard et al, 1998; Ainsef et al, 2001).

V. Keeping the promise to respect diversity: The potential for ECEC

From many perspectives, despite a history of debate about colonization, conquest, racist treatment of selected groups and failure to remedy historic injustice to indigenous peoples, considering the extent of Canadian diversity, modern Canada can be termed **relatively** "successful" as a multicultural society, at least as far as in-migrants are concerned. However, as a recent book by Stein et al argues, new debates are emerging in Canada as issues of rights, policy and

[9] For example, see The Learning Partnership, 2008

practice defined by race, religion, culture and equality are being reframed (2007). Other current analyses – Banting et al, for example – concur that "stress points are appearing" and that it is an "appropriate time to stand back and take stock", and to raise important questions about whether and how diversity can continue to be a "Canadian success story: How well is Canada succeeding on the twin agendas of recognition and integration? Do we recognize and support diversity as much as our self-congratulatory pronouncements often suggest? Do we face deepening ethnic divisions that weaken our capacity for collective action and threaten our social cohesion? If there are problems around the corner, what should we do?" (Banting, Courchene, and Seidle, 2007).

Inglis has noted in a key paper on multiculturalism prepared for UNESCO that "successful management of multiculturalism and multiethnic societies requires not only a democratic polity, but the struggle against social inequalities and exclusion" (1995). Canada – like other liberal welfare regimes - has never been a very equitable society. Beginning in the 1990s and becoming more pervasive in the latter part of the 2000s, funding cuts, devolution from the national level and privatization of the social safety net that had been developed in the post World War II-era to mitigate inequality and poverty (social assistance, unemployment insurance, training and education support for employment, settlement programs for newcomers, programs to promote women's equality, minimum wages, housing, health care and post-secondary education) have helped move Canada toward being a less equitable society (Osberg, 2007). While governments across the ideological spectrum have been moving in this direction, it has been exacerbated nationally in Canada over the last 15 years as governments have reduced funding for social programs. Most recently, this has included canceling -even before it began - Canada's first national early childhood education and care policy, initiated in 2005 and cancelled by the subsequent

government in 2006 (Friendly and White, 2007) and withdrawing the Kelowna Accord, a historic 2005 financing agreement intended to "improve education, employment, and living conditions for Aboriginal people". Evidence about some of the effects of the erosion of the Canadian welfare state was recently summarized in a comparative analysis by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. According to this study, poverty and inequality rates in Canada have been on the rise since the mid 1990s and are now not only higher than they are in most other developed nations but are continuing to grow (OECD, 2008). The possibilities for new and deepening ethnic and racial divisions in an extremely diverse society such as Canada face when the context is one of inequality and social injustice are not encouraging.

In a variety of ways, early childhood education and care has an important role to play in any cohesive, socially inclusive society. Friendly notes that "early childhood education and care is a key link – a central connection in the safety net. ECEC can be a primary means of supporting and strengthening social inclusion in a meaningful way by playing multiple vital roles for both children and adults in creating social inclusion in diverse societies" (2007: 12) . Friendly and Lero, examining the circumstances under which ECEC programs contribute to this conception of social inclusion, identified four goals that they can help to accomplish:

- Enhance children's well-being, development and prospects for lifelong learning;
- Facilitate parents' participation in education, training and employment;
- Support equity and social justice;
- Strengthen social solidarity and social cohesion (2002).

Although Canadian ECEC programs at this time are too limited to be able to play any of these roles comprehensively or well, their potential as a foundation

for strengthening ideas about respect for diversity in the earliest years should not be overlooked. Based on the available Canadian research and the provincial curriculum frameworks that have been recently developed, it does appear that respecting diversity and working towards social inclusion are already part of the early childhood education culture in Canada; in fact, it is the early childhood community that seems to most recognize this potential of the early years. Although Canadian research on the nexus between early childhood education and diversity is sparse, one study that examined the relationship between Canadian identity and anti-bias early childhood education found that the early childhood education students who were the respondents suggested that "the very fabric of Canadian identity includes the interweaving of many cultures. The culture of the First Nations people is part and parcel of the fabric of Canadian heritage as are – for example – the stories of the Chinese who helped build the railway and the Ukrainians who settled the prairies. Canadian culture continues to grow and expand, and that is a good thing as it makes us all richer" (Clark and Shimoni, 2000: 59). With this in mind, it would seem that a more widely accessible, well supported, inclusive and coherent childhood education and care system could offer a prime opportunity to strengthen respect for diversity in countries like Canada that are increasingly complex.

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