IECSS

**Policy Brief No. 8
May 2020**

**Black Experience and Disabled Childhoods:
Comparison of Federal and Provincial Policies**

Introduction

In 2017, the Canadian federal government released a *Multilateral and Early Learning Child Care Framework* to support families and communities in their efforts to ensure the best possible future for their children. In the same year, the Ontario government released a *Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework* after consultations with early childhood professionals to address the need for a high quality and accessible early learning and childcare services in the province. Finally, the *Anti-Black Racism Strategy (2017)* was also released by the Ontario government to target systemic racism in policies, decisions and programs, and to move towards long-term systemic change for Black Canadians across the province. All three policies are meant to govern the ways in which early childhood education, care and intervention services are delivered in intentional and anti-oppressive ways to ensure the equitable access and delivery of services. It is important to ask, since 2017, how have these policies worked together to affect change in the early childhood education and care sector, as well as systemic change for Black families? This brief seeks to examine the ways in which these policies intersect to address childhood disability, anti-Black racism and ultimately the Black experience of disabled childhoods.

The IECSS Project and Institutional Responses to Childhood Disability

The purpose of the IECSS project is to better understand experiences of disability in early childhood, and to understand how services are delivered in varied geographic and cultural contexts. The aim is to build theoretical understanding that may inform social policy for the purpose of having more respectful and responsive supports that recognize the value of disability identities, and the need for universally designed services. Furthermore, "colonialism continues to create social conditions of poverty, environmental risk, and trauma that also are causes of childhood disability" (Underwood, Ineese-Nash & Haché, 2019, p. 22). Finding services to support a child diagnosed with a disability takes a considerable amount of coordination, self-advocacy, and knowledge of service systems usually based on experiences of interacting with these services. From the family perspective, early learning programs, intervention services, medical supports, cultural programs and other social services comprise a network, or system, of early years services. From an institutional standpoint, these services are compartmentalized into distinct program categories, each with their own processes and criteria for access. Screening and other procedural aspects of this system for young

children have been critiqued for their assumptions about development and the values that are entrenched in this system which may not be consistent with what families want and with the cultural values that communities hold (Underwood, Ineese-Nash & Haché, 2019). This puts families in the position of continuously adapting to the needs of the system in order to access service.

The Black Canadian Experience and Anti-Black Racism

According to the 2016 Census, the Black population accounts for 3.5% of Canada's total population and children under 15 years old represent 26.6% of the Black population. Within the Toronto District School Board, which is the largest school board in Canada with over 250,000 students, Blacks make up 22% of the special education population. Black students are overrepresented among students labelled with behavioural issues, mild intellectual disability and developmental disability (Brown & Parekh, 2014). The origins of the labels, diagnoses and stereotypes that follow these students into the education system can begin within the early childhood education, care and intervention system. Underwood, Ineese-Nash and Haché (2019) assert that institutional intervention, especially for Indigenous children, may reproduce colonial practices that undermine children's cultural

identities and familial connections. "Systemic racism occurs when institutions or systems create or maintain racial inequity, often as a result of hidden institutional biases in policies, practices and procedures that privilege some groups and disadvantage others"(Anti-Racism Directorate, 2017, p.2).

These colonial practices and the intergenerational consequences of colonialism may also affect the Black experience of childhood disability in Canada. Although Canada is often praised for having been a site of freedom for African Americans along the underground railroad, Canada has and continues to operate in colonial ways that have drastically affected the lives of Black Canadians. For example, the Anti-Black Racism Strategy (2017) identifies that, "Black children are more likely to be in foster care or enrolled in lower academic streams" (Anti-Racism Directorate, 2017, p.2). Within the IECSS project data we have a number of examples of families who have experienced surveillance or custodial apprehension of their children as a result of their children being flagged for developmental concerns. Preliminary analysis indicates this is linked to family income, family disability status, and race.

Ontario's Anti-Racism Directorate was established in 2016 and has since partnered with public sector organizations to address anti-Black racism and develop evidence-based solutions that can be expanded within future provincial policies, programs and strategies. Identified partners to date include

the Toronto District School Board, the Peel District School Board, the Children's Aid Society and the Youth Justice Division. Furthermore, the recently published Review of the Peel District School board identified ministerial directions to PDSB aimed at addressing the systemic discrimination, and specifically anti-Black racism that permeates the board's practices and effects the education outcomes of Black students. Although the report does not specifically address the experiences of Black disabled children in special education, understanding the nuances of their experiences can support systemic change.

Policies Comparison

In this brief, Canada's *Multilateral and Early Learning Child Care Framework* (2017), *Ontario's Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework* (2017) and *Ontario's Anti-Black Racism Strategy* (2017) are examined for their underlying commitments to anti-black racism and disability identity. Theories of critical disability, critical race theory and Black feminist thought were used to examine the policy documents. Table 1 in the Appendix outlines the recommendations and objectives within each policy document and compares the ways in which each document addresses childhood disability, anti-Black racism and the Black experience.

In Canada, provinces and territories have the primary responsibility for the design and delivery of early learning and childcare systems. The ELCC has a section dedicated to public reporting on the annual progress of the framework and the impact of federal funding on the priorities of each provincial jurisdiction. The Government of Canada has also released a separate Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (see IECSS Policy Brief No 7) in order to address matters specific to Indigenous children and families in Canada due to federal government's commitment to the care of Indigenous children on reserve and the tenants of Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The policy is guided by the principles of quality, accessibility, affordability, flexibility and inclusivity in early learning and childcare. Evidence to support the ELCC is derived from literature based in developmental psychology and neuroscience regarding self-regulation and learning and behaviour. Research suggests that early intervention programs operating from a medical model (i.e., those that treat developmental differences as resulting from individual characteristics) are less successful than those incorporating a more

holistic view of the childhood development (Underwood, Ineese-Nash & Haché, 2019, p. 22).

The ABRS vision is to eliminate disparate outcomes for Black Ontarians in the child welfare, education and justice sectors by 2024 to align with the close of the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent. The Strategy seeks to lead in long-term change across systems by developing progress targets in child welfare, education and justice sectors based on available data. Collecting race-based data on children with disabilities across the province would honour an intersectional analysis of disabled childhood experiences across system sectors. Other scalable initiatives identified in the policy include, "strengthening inclusive and culturally responsive and relevant teaching, curriculum, assessment and resources". Furthermore, the ABRS intends to conduct a, "case review of all files related to Black children in care to identify patterns and themes that lead to disparity outcomes, or represent best practices when working with Black communities". The question remains how many children engaged in the child welfare system, and youth engaged in the justice system, have identified or undiagnosed disabilities.

Future Directions

All three policies indicate a commitment to accessibility to quality care for all children regardless of ability or race. The early years frameworks refer to the inclusion of children with 'special needs', while the ABRS highlights Black children's rights to anti-discrimination. Ultimately the federal and provincial early years frameworks demonstrate an investment in early childhood from a developmental and human capital approach, and commitment to quality and accessibility in early childhood education and care for all children. Directions for future research to influence policy are considered in the areas of intersectional analysis, expanding awareness of anti-Black racism across the early years sectors and understanding institutional responses to and experiences of Black disabled children and their families.

Analysis

None of the three policies take up disability, childhood and the Black experience together. They each make general references to cultural diversity, 'special needs' and inclusion. There is a lack of intersectional analysis specifically in the ELCC, when it comes to considering the ways in which institutional interactions and responses to childhood disability can be affected by racism and discrimination.

"Intersectional understandings of disability, drawn from intersectional feminism and disability studies, destabilize reductionist accounts of individual pathology and privilege new forms of pedagogical thinking and acting that prioritize a social justice framework in tackling wider systemic rigidities and oppressive educational regimes" (Liasidou, 2013, p.299). Furthermore, a Black feminist disability framework allows for methodological considerations of the intersectional nature of oppression (Bailey & Mobley, 2019).

Recommendation #1:
Federal and provincial policies need to address intersectional interests related to black lives and disabled children and their families.

Awareness

The ABRS identifies increasing public awareness and general understanding of systemic racism as a way to advance efforts of anti-Black racism. This public awareness extends beyond education and justice systems and needs to consider the specific experiences of young Black disabled children in early childhood and the ways in which their families navigate the service sector.

Recommendation #2:

There need to be increased public awareness and understanding of systemic anti-Black racism across early childhood education, intervention and care services. This must include recognition of both the ways the historical and present day anti-black racism impact childhoods, and how ableism and disability effect early childhood and family experiences.

Representation

Targeted recruitment and engagement of Black families in research studies and advisory roles for policy development is necessary in order to understand the specific experiences of Black disabled children and their families. More data on the mechanisms for accessing early childhood education, care and intervention services at both the provincial and federal levels is needed.

Recommendation #3:

Targeted recruitment and engagement of Black families to better understand the institutional experiences of Black disabled children in research that informs policy related to black families and disabled families.

Conclusions

"If Disability Studies took up Black Studies and critical race theory in ways that displaced the white disabled body as the norm, we might gain a stronger, more flexible, and globally relevant framework from which to critique late neoliberal capitalism. Too often we engage race and its impact as an additive or comparative category of difference rather than a constitutive aspect of notions of disability in the West" (Bailey & Mobley, 2019, p.35).

Cultural and decolonial understandings of how disability is conceptualized and responded to at the institutional level is vital to delivering programs and services at the federal and provincial levels for disabled children. Within Black communities there may by concerns about the deficit understandings associated with disability and with mainstream institutions imposing analysis of trauma, health disparities and disabilities that are specific to black people (Bailey & Mobley, 2019).

The early childhood experiences of Black disabled children continues to be hidden within early childhood education, care, and intervention systems, as well within welfare and justice systems. Colonial imposed labels based in Western and medicalized developmental approaches may clash with the diversity of cultural backgrounds that

make up the Black experience (Chataika & Mckenzie, 2013). This is consistent with the ways in which Indigenous world views of childhood disability as a gift and holistic approaches to child development clash with early intervention service delivery (Underwood, Ineese-Nash & Haché, 2019). Policy and research guided by Black feminist approaches and other feminist frameworks, such as institutional ethnography in the IECSS project, may highlight the nuances of these experiences and the challenges of institutional responses to specific racial groups.

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Appendix:

Table 1: Summary of Policy Analysis based on Guiding Questions

POLICY DOCUMENT	*Canada's Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (2017)*	*Ontario's Anti Black Racism Strategy (2017)*	*Ontario's Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework (2017)*
Objectives	1. Increasing access to early years and childcare programs and services 2. Ensuring a more affordable early years and childcare system 3. Establishing an early years workforce strategy 4. Determining a provincial definition of quality in the early years. 5. Developing an approach to promoting inclusion in the early years and childcare settings 6. Creating an outcomes and measurement strategy 7. Increasing public awareness of Ontario's early years and childcare system	1. Lead long-term change across systems 2. Build system capacity and competency 3. Partner with 'early adopter' service providers to study application on a wider scale 4. Increase Black community engagement and capacity 5. Increase public awareness and understanding of systemic racism	1. Increasing access to early years and childcare programs and services 2. Ensuring a more affordable early years and childcare system 3. Establishing an early years workforce strategy 4. Determining a provincial definition of quality in the early years 5. Developing an approach to promoting inclusion in early years and childcare settings 6. Creating an outcomes measurement strategy 7. Increasing public awareness of Ontario's early years and childcare system
How do the policies address childhood disability?	- Recommendation 5 promotes easier navigation of services and supports for children with 'special needs' (p. 7)	- No mention of childhood disability	- The need to increase supports for children with special needs was identified. (p.19)

	- Families with children with 'varying abilities' (p. 3)		
How do the policies address anti-Black racism and/or the Black experience?	- No mention of anti-Black racism or the Black experience	- The Anti-Black Racism Strategy (ABRS) is about targeting systemic racism in policies, decisions and programs, and helping us move toward long-term systemic change.	- No mention of anti-Black racism or the Black experience, but general reference to cultural appropriateness
How do the policies address the Black experience and the intersection of disabled childhoods from a systemic approach?	**-** Inclusivity for diverse populations, which includes but are not limited to children from French and English linguistic minority communities, Indigenous people off-reserve, recent immigrants and refugees (p. 6) - Black experience may be hidden in minority communities, immigrants and refugee categories - Governments also recognize the diverse and multicultural fabric of Canada.	- Systemic racism occurs when institutions or systems create or maintain racial inequity, often as a result of hidden institutional biases in policies, practices and procedures that privilege some groups and disadvantage others. - The disproportionate amount of Black children in foster care and enrolled in lower academic streams - disabled childhood experiences may be hidden in these categories	- "We will ensure that our approach to quality is connected and aligned with our other strategies, and that it includes a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion. We will also ensure that our mechanisms for supporting and assessing quality include nurturing positive relationships, creating engaging and culturally appropriate environments and experiences, and documenting children's exploration and learning." (p. 30)