

Social Inclusion Research in Canada: Children and Youth

Introduction

Social inclusion, as a policy concept, is not new. It began in Europe in response to the growing social divides resulting from labour market conditions and the inadequacy of existing social welfare provisions to meet the changing needs of more diverse populations (Frierler, 2002).

However, examining the concept of social inclusion as it relates to children and youth in Canada is relatively new in Canada – just beginning over the last few years.

The Canadian research efforts and publications regarding children and youth and social inclusion are by and large exploratory in nature – and are relatively new. What is being written and published at the present time seems to fall into four categories:

- analysis of available data to construct measures of inclusion and exclusion;
- conceptual discussions of the meaning of social exclusion and inclusion for children and youth;
- attempts to examine specific factors which influence the exclusion and inclusion of children and youth (such as income, recreation, education, early childhood care and education) through reviews of existing evidence and analysis of existing data sets; and
- research regarding specific groups of children (for example, children and youth with disabilities and immigrant and refugee youth).

All of these are important if we are to move forward in our understanding of social inclusion so that we can influence Canadian policy in a meaningful way.

In this paper, I will bring forward some highlights and examples of research and writing as it relates to these four categories. In each category I will raise questions that beg further study. Based on my reflections on this information, I will then go on to identify what I see as the challenges facing Canadian research regarding social inclusion and children and youth.

This paper is based, not on an exhaustive review of the literature of the social inclusion of children and youth, but rather on a review of selected Canadian publications – which are found in the reference list. The dynamic nature of our workshop will enable participants to identify other important information, to

discuss its contribution and importance and to identify gaps and future challenges.

Measuring inclusion (and exclusion)

We are seeing some research and writing in Canada that is attempting to describe the experience of social inclusion and/or exclusion of our children. The authors construct measures of exclusion. They describe their work as exploratory in nature, and as a beginning. This research primarily describes the phenomenon of 'exclusion' as opposed to 'inclusion'. It looks at the measures of exclusion and describes them based on existing survey data. I would like to cite two examples.

Phipps and Curtis (2001) used National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) data to describe childhood exclusion in Canada. They chose five measures – lack of success at school; general ill health; inability to participate in normal activities; poor relations with peers; and lack of participation in organized recreational activities. They found that four per cent of children aged six to thirteen are limited in their ability to participate in activities of daily life. Approximately ten per cent of 10 to 13 year olds experience isolation from peers. Twenty-one per cent of six to nine year olds and nine per cent of ten to thirteen year olds do not participate in organized recreation. Approximately 2% of six to nine year olds and three per cent of ten to thirteen year olds' mothers report their success at school is poor. While the majority of the children who experience exclusion, did so in only one dimension, two percent – or almost 87,000 children – were socially excluded on two or more dimensions.

The Canadian Council on Social Development's *Progress of Canada's Children* has been monitoring data from the NLSCY over three cycles. Progress is an indicators based report that looks at the context of children's lives – inputs – as well as how well they are doing – outputs. Over the past six years *Progress* has reported on a number of measures of social inclusion of children and youth – specifically relationships with family, friends and teachers as well as their relationships with and participation with their community.

This research has been primarily descriptive in nature – and has examined either single measures of inclusion or exclusion, or grouped three or four measures. The authors of this research call for further investigation that will look at the relational aspects of inclusion and children's experiences over time.

The conceptual discussion: Social exclusion – or social inclusion – or both?

Much of the leadership for the conceptual discussions surrounding social exclusion and social inclusion in Canada, as it relates to children and youth has been shown by the Laidlaw Foundation through their Children's Agenda program. Their Working Paper Series on Perspectives on Social Inclusion has stimulated thought, discussion and shed light on a number of aspects of the social inclusion of Canadian children.

The Laidlaw Foundation has said that as a tool, social inclusion turns public policy making upside down. Rather than making it incumbent on the individual to fit the program, social inclusion starts from the experiences of the individual and challenges society to provide a meaningful place for everyone. Attempts to deal with exclusion through individual redress have proven to be inadequate to address the personal and systemic exclusions experienced by children and adults. Social inclusion calls for a valuing of diversity, not just the recognition of diversity and difference. It recognizes that diversity and difference do possess their own worth – and are not challenges to be overcome. Public policy born of social inclusion links the lived experiences of children and families, both in terms of the actual policies and in the process for arriving at those policies and programs. Citizens are engaged in policy development.

A number of authors who write about social inclusion cite Amartya Sen. They say that his conception of an inclusive society is one in which members participate meaningfully and actively, enjoy equality, share social experiences, and attain fundamental well-being. Therefore, inclusion is an active process – it goes beyond remediation of deficits and reduction of risk. It promotes human development and ensures that opportunities are not missed – not just for some, but for all children (Sen, 2000; Friendly and Lero, 2002).

Laidlaw further describes that social inclusion is a complex and challenging concept that cannot be reduced to only one dimension or meaning. They identify five critical dimensions of social inclusion: valued recognition, human development, involvement and engagement, proximity and material well-being (Freiler, 2002).

Therefore, social inclusion is a complex concept that is multidimensional. Historically in Canada, we have focussed on a deficit approach to developing policies and program – we look for what is wrong and try to fix it. It is not surprising then, that much of the published papers and research initiatives in Canada are a mix of 'social exclusion' and 'social inclusion' – or focus exclusively on an exclusion approach. Many authors use social exclusion as a starting point, and as Frieler says – "they share the view that social exclusion has value on its own as both a process and a goal" (Freiler, 2000).

Laidlaw has pointed out that social exclusion works through an inter-play of conditions or circumstances, such as poverty, unemployment, lone motherhood; attitudes or values, such as fear of differences, racism; and processes, such as

segregation, silencing, institutionalization. The consequences are the same – a lack of recognition of acceptance, powerlessness; vulnerability; diminished life experiences; and limited life prospects.

Jackson and Scott (2002) state that a social inclusion perspective clearly places an obligation on society to ensure the conditions for all children to realize their potential. A genuinely inclusive society for children would have broad equality of material circumstances and developmental outcomes. Inclusion demands that specific barriers to inclusion, such as disability and low income, be addressed.

Therefore, the social exclusion and inclusion of children and youth are complex concepts. In terms of research, it is one with which we have little experience. These conceptual discussions will help us sort through these complexities and come to an understanding of what social inclusion means for Canadian children. Since much of our experience is with concepts of exclusion – I believe it remains useful to examine both concepts to enrich our understanding.

Examining factors influencing social inclusion

A significant amount of the work that is being done in Canada today is looking at certain factors in children's lives that influence social inclusion. I have selected four examples – families, early childhood education and care and recreation. There are others. We are just beginning to try to understand these relationships – most of this literature is conceptual and of a review nature. We will need to develop this work further.

Children in the context of families

Children are a unique group that is dependent upon others, both individually and collectively, to survive and thrive. They are individuals who may have different experiences from their parents, but they are particularly dependent upon the key adults in their lives. They are included or excluded depending upon the circumstances of the families in which they live. But inclusion or exclusion is not simply “transmitted” from households to children; it travels through the key environmental factors that affect the opportunities that children have in the present that, in turn influence their future life chances (Jackson and Scott, 2002).

The Canadian Council on Social Development's *Progress of Canada's Children* (2002) examined the impacts of the family's experience and environments on their children's inclusion. Using data from the NLSCY, they found that children living in families which are struggling are more likely to be excluded from some of the fundamental aspects of life essential to their healthy development. They found that children are less likely to have positive experiences at school, less likely to participate in recreation, and to get along well with friends, if they live in families struggling with parental depression, family dysfunction or violence.

Phipps and Curtis (2001) also examined the connection between more typically 'adult' or 'family-level' measures of exclusion and a child measure which is developed in her paper. She focused on four markers of 'parental/family social exclusion' – low income status; non-home ownership; low-maternal education; and having social assistance as the major source of household income. All dimensions were associated with greater social exclusion of children. Family poverty was consistently associated with greater social exclusion of children, through the relationship was smaller for children aged 10 to 13 than for the younger children. For six to nine year olds the social exclusion rate of poor children was 1.8 times the rate for non-poor children.

The CCSD (in the Progress of Canada's Children) also used the NLSCY to examine the influence of poverty on children's social inclusion. They concluded that children who live in poverty are less likely to participate fully in aspects of life that are most critical to their healthy growth and development. Close to one-in-three children had been poor at least once in 1994, 1996 and 1998 and about one-in-ten was poor over all three years. Being persistently poor had grave consequences. Children who lived in persistent poverty were less likely to be included in important aspects of society that were critical to their healthy growth and development -- strong, healthy families, positive school experiences, and good health. Furthermore they reported that in Canada, over the 1990s, the poor became poorer while the rich got richer – forcing poor children further and further away from full participation in society.

Jackson and Scott (2002) argued that the conditions for social inclusion or exclusion of children are determined in large part by the labour force experiences of their parents. They identified three key linkages from work to child well-being and development – income, time and stress. They stated that children need adequate and stable family incomes to meet their immediate and developmental needs. They thrive when their parents are actively involved in their lives and in their community. And they can suffer when parents experience high stress on the job, from precarious employment or from the challenges of reconciling the demands of paid work with those of home and family. The authors claimed that these linkages are not direct. There are at least two mediating factors at work: the dynamics of individual families, who differ greatly in their capacities to deal with potential impacts of low or unstable incomes or stress on their children, and the social policy context surrounding work and family. They conclude that ideally, parents' labour market experience would enable them to do well on all three dimensions of income, time and stress. However, the available evidence strongly suggests that the structure and functioning of the contemporary labour market in Canada increasingly works against the creation of inclusive conditions and circumstances for children.

Early childhood education and care

Friendly and Lero (2002) have made the case in their research that, under the right conditions, early childhood education and care (ECEC) can make a significant contribution to social inclusion by supporting children's development, family well-being, community cohesion and equity. A high-quality ECEC program provides intellectual and social stimulation that promotes cognitive development and social competence. It also improves life quality for the child in the here-and-now. ECEC programs support parents by helping to reduce social exclusion linked to poverty, unemployment, marginal employment, disempowerment and social isolation. Dependable care for children is essential if mothers are to participate in the labour force. And, ECEC plays a role in promoting equity through ensuring the development of capabilities and access to society's resources for all children – children with disabilities, special learning needs and chronic health problems require programs that welcome them and that can enhance their development and full participation in our society.

The authors conclude, however, that in Canada we have not created the right conditions that would enable ECEC to strengthen social inclusion. Key structural and policy changes are needed to create an integrated, high-quality, accessible system for all preschool children, including those with special needs.

Recreation

Donnelly and Coakley (in press) have reviewed the research investigating the relationship between social inclusion and recreation. They conclude that no studies have been found which specifically test the ability of recreation to promote social inclusion, or which examine projects with this aim. However, the literature suggests the terms under which recreation might promote social inclusion. These include:

- Accessibility – without access to recreation opportunities, any analysis of this issue is moot;
- 'Agency' – democratic participation – where participants are able to determine their participation – seem likely to be best suited for furthering the development of citizenship and social inclusion;
- Competence – the development of physical abilities to the point where an individual feels 'competent', has powerful effects on self-esteem and confidence – important conditions for processes of social inclusion;
- Continuity and consistency of participation are likely to result in a greater impact
- Integration – programmes targeted to specific populations are less likely to have social inclusion effects than those which bring together children and youth from different backgrounds
- Leadership – the real benefits of involvement in recreation are most likely to be realized with good leadership.

The authors conclude that positive transitions from childhood to adolescence to adulthood are most likely when young people live in a context in which they are:

physically safe; personally valued; socially connected; morally and economically supported; personally and politically empowered; and hopeful about the future. To the extent that recreation programs serve these needs, they can be expected to contribute to the positive development of participants.

Research regarding particular groups of children

We are seeing, in Canada, a focus on certain groups of children who are considered 'vulnerable' – at risk of being excluded. Authors are looking at their experiences, and what would enable them to enjoy inclusion in Canadian society. I have chosen two examples of this work – relating to children and youth with disabilities and children and youth who are immigrants and refugees. There is more work being done, and much more yet to be done.

Children who are immigrants and refugees

A number of authors have studied children and youth who are immigrants or refugees. Omidvar and Richmond, 2003, found that the settlement process has a major effect on children and youth. Many youth feel torn between apparently irreconcilable values or cultures and a desire to fit in to their new homeland. Feelings of isolation and alienation are linked to perceptions of cultural differences and experience of discrimination and racism. When these conflicts are combined with a life lived in poverty, there is a real danger of fostering a culture of alienation among youth who do not feel connected to their parents, their country of origin, or their host society. Support from friends, family and institutions is key to overcoming the challenges of settlement. The Canadian Council on Social Development (2000) in *Immigrant Youth in Canada* found that recent immigrant youth faced difficulties integrating into high school. Their sense of belonging to Canada was weak. Typically, they described Canada in positive, yet dispassionate tones, emphasizing the economic advantages it offered while describing how they missed their family and friends "back home". Recent immigrants shared experiences of racism in Canada. They felt that they were often depicted negatively in the Canadian media – perpetuating stereotypes.

Children with disabilities

There has been a fair amount of research describing the exclusion of children with disabilities – as a result of the leadership shown by the Roeher Institute and other groups. It has focused on families' access to community supports and services (Roeher Institute); children's inclusion in child care settings and school; the socioeconomic impact on raising children with disabilities; the participation of children and youth with disabilities in their communities.

The Canadian Council on Social Development, based on analysis of the NLSCY, found that children with disabilities run the risk of being socially excluded from a number of opportunities that the majority of Canadian children take for granted.

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The researchers concluded that children with disabilities are not full and active members of their communities. At school, children with special needs are not integrated nor included socially or academically at the same level as their peers without special needs. Community agencies lack the financial and human resources they need to adequately serve children and youth with special needs. This confirms the research of the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children who concluded that “children with disabilities in Canada have varying opportunities to live full lives (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 1999). Many Canadian studies have concluded that while most children with disabilities and their parents are *living* in our communities, they are *not active members* of these communities. While some provinces have made gains in various areas, there is no coherent vision for achieving the best possible policy mix for children with disabilities and their parents (Valentine, 2001). Few provinces have such a vision for their own jurisdiction, and no consensus exists as yet for the country as a whole.

Based on their research, The Roeher Institute has identified specific policy goals to ensure inclusion of children with disabilities and their families as:

- Establishing inclusive values, rights and approaches for healthy child development;
- Enhancing family economic security;
- Ensuring needed child and family supports – at home and in the community;
- Fostering inclusive communities; and
- Strengthening civil society

The Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) identified similar important enabling conditions for children with disabilities to reach their full potential: adequate income; effective parenting; and supportive community environments. The notion of a supportive community includes a number of components and involves a variety of policy and investment choices by community groups, employers and governments. At its foundation, however, the notion of a supportive community environment must provide full access and participation for all children – including those with disabilities – as well as their parents and siblings. This means offering inclusive services such as child care, health, respite services, homecare education and recreation – that enable all families to participate as full citizens. It means constructing a fully accessible environment so all children can go to the shopping centre, go to the movies, and attend swimming lessons at the community pool. It means family-friendly and disability-sensitive social policies – including employment policies, maternity/parental leave policies, collective agreements and employment contracts.

Bach (2002) has contributed significantly to the conceptual discourse and to our understanding of what social inclusion of children with disabilities really means. He has challenged us to expand our thinking. He defines social inclusion as the

process of bringing valued recognition to the marginalized, and he focuses on children with disabilities. He argues that this vision of citizenship goes beyond a human rights agenda – it demands social, cultural and economic participation in civil society – “a life well-lived in community”. While a rights based agenda is essential, it is not enough to ensure that children with disabilities and other groups can participate fully in social, cultural and economic life. He proposes a ‘solidarity agenda’ for children with disabilities, which is based on recognizing them fully, and enabling them to speak their voices, exercise their rights, and secure their own path to well-being. A rights-based approach allows society to avoid responsibility when costs are high; it results in individual compensation rather than systemic change; and its laws can be fragile.

Where then do we need to focus future research?

Since research into the social inclusion of children and youth is relatively young, there are many aspects that warrant further study. Here are a few.

Work on the dynamic aspect of inclusion

All of the writers I have reviewed have emphasized the dynamic aspect of social exclusion and inclusion – that it is a process rather than a state. This is critically important in the lives of children and youth and we need to study this phenomenon further. Not only will it be important to examine the dynamic dimensions of inclusion and exclusion but also their persistence over time. And, in order to fully understand how to enhance social inclusion among children in Canada – or conversely to decrease exclusion – we need to know a great deal more about the process through which social inclusion – or exclusion – develops. Social inclusion is a complex concept that cannot be reduced to only one measurement.

Focus on a developmental analysis

It is critical to examine the social inclusion of children and youth from a developmental perspective. This needs to be understood in two important ways. First, children are not miniature adults. They are different than adults and we need to understand the social inclusion of children from their own perspective. We have had a tendency to take an ‘investment’ approach to children and their development – asking the question “How will their experience today influence their adult life?”, rather than “How is their experience today influencing them today?” While it is important to address both phenomena – it is critical not to forget the latter! Furthermore, children and youth are not a homogeneous group – they are in different developmental stages. As they grow and develop through infancy, toddler and pre-schoolerhood, school-age and into the teen years, they grow, learn and develop exponentially. Therefore, their experiences of being included – or excluded – change through each developmental stage, and they are uniquely experienced by each child.

But it is important to consider their development from another perspective as well – that each stage of their development impacts on the next – and yes, ultimately on their lives as adults. Hertzman has offered insight into this phenomenon. In *Leave No Child Behind! Social Exclusion and Child Development*, Hertzman describes how social exclusion begins for infants and young children who do not experience the necessary conditions for good developmental health. The infant brain, being highly sensitive to the environment around it, develops best in an environment characterized by high levels of attachment, stimulation and support. Hertzman tells us that children’s primary environment is the family, but they are also affected by the kind of neighbourhood the family lives in, the community, and the society/economy and its policies. The quality of early nurturing and stimulant plays out over a lifetime. Some biological or developmental factors have critical to sensitive periods in early life, and will impact later life regardless of intervention experience. Others set young children on life courses that have an impact over time. And, advantages or disadvantages accumulate over time, based on the duration and intensity of exposure to a variety of risks.

Social exclusion occurs whenever the “environments where people grow up, live and work, and the institutions that govern them, arbitrarily limit their opportunity to participate in society” (Hertzman, 2002). The consequences of social exclusion can be devastating for children: they suffer a lack of recognition and acceptance; they feel powerless and voiceless; they are economically vulnerable; and ultimately, they have diminished life experiences and face limited life prospects.

Hertzman tells us that developmental differences are not inherent in the individual. They are not randomly distributed. They are socially patterned. For example, developmental risk increases in stepwise fashion as one descends the socioeconomic ladder. While he identifies that approximately 25% of Canadian children are developmentally vulnerable when they enter school (Willms, 2002), the highest proportion of children who are who are developmentally vulnerable are at the bottom; the lowest proportion are at the top, among families with the most wealth and education.

And, Jackson and Scott (2002) have pointed out that what counts is not just the presence or absence of disadvantage, but the gaps and distances created by inequality. Income inequality is the most common (though imperfect) proxy for a host of potential threats to inclusion and equal life chances for children, such as the quality of housing, the safety of neighbourhoods, and the ability of parents to obtain developmentally important opportunities for their children (e.g., educational materials and recreation).

Jackson and Scott

Continue to study young people who are particularly marginalized

This paper has included two examples of research of children who are marginalized – children and youth with disabilities and children and youth who

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are immigrants and refugees. More work needs to be done to understand the dynamics of their experience and how public policy will address it. However, there are other groups of children who need to be considered. Most notably Aboriginal children – who are arguably among the most excluded of all children and youth. While there has been some descriptive analysis of the condition of our Aboriginal children and youth, we need to enable Aboriginal communities to conduct research to fully understand not only what inclusion means to Aboriginal children and youth, but how public policy will enable them to fully participate and to enjoy equal life chances in Canadian society.

And - most important - ask young people - and listen to them

As noted throughout this paper, much of the research and writing that is being done on social inclusion in Canada today is based on descriptive, and primarily quantitative, analyses. While this is important in contributing to our understanding of how included children are, it is based on adult constructed themes and definitions of inclusion. Asking young people what they think of the concepts of inclusion and exclusion – and what their experience has been – will enrich our understanding.

I would like to share the findings from two pieces of work – and I am sure there are more that we can discuss. The first being Catherine Frazee’s work for the Laidlaw Foundation with youth with disabilities, and the second being focus groups conducted for the Canadian Council on Children and Youth’s *Progress of Canada’s Children*. They both have striking similarities. I am not suggesting that these are representative studies, but they provide important insights. Catherine Frazee interviewed six young people aged 15 to 18 (two of whom had disabilities, and the others being close friends or relatives of a child or youth with disabilities) and found that they saw social inclusion to be about more than access to participation – but about access to respect, selfhood and human community. For the most part, they defined inclusion in terms of opportunity – to participate, to achieve, to be seen and understood – most importantly to be accepted and belong. This provides great insights into enabling young people to be included – as Frazee put it “while much remains to be done to dismantle the multiple physical, structural and systemic barriers and restrictions that impede disabled persons’ opportunities to act in the social world...Access must also be about making one’s way into citizenship and human community and about feeling secure and worthy.”

CCSD’s focus groups with young people (conducted by Ekos Research) revealed that the youth saw social inclusion in the context of participating in and contributing to their community. In addition, the young people, in all age groups – 12 to 24 – described inclusion as having a strong attachment to people, specifically a group of friends. Furthermore, they seemed to understand the connection between attachment and vulnerability. Several stated that without a strong attachment to people – such as a group of friends – young people risk being excluded from their social landscape. According to many youth, social

exclusion invariably results in an increased vulnerability. School is also recognized as a source of inclusion – or exclusion. When asked what were the most significant sources of stress among their peers, kids aged 12 to 14 focused on issues related to the social dynamics of their schools.

There has been recent Canadian research on young people and belonging. For example, the analysis on the BC Adolescent Health Survey demonstrated the connection between young people's sense of connection to others had a strong impact on their physical and emotional health. They also demonstrated how this connectedness contributed to the young people's resilience when in difficult and/or risky situations. In addition, we have learned a great deal from the community health and development field and their work with youth and community development. This knowledge needs to be combined with rich, qualitative research that documents young people's understanding of and experience with social inclusion.

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