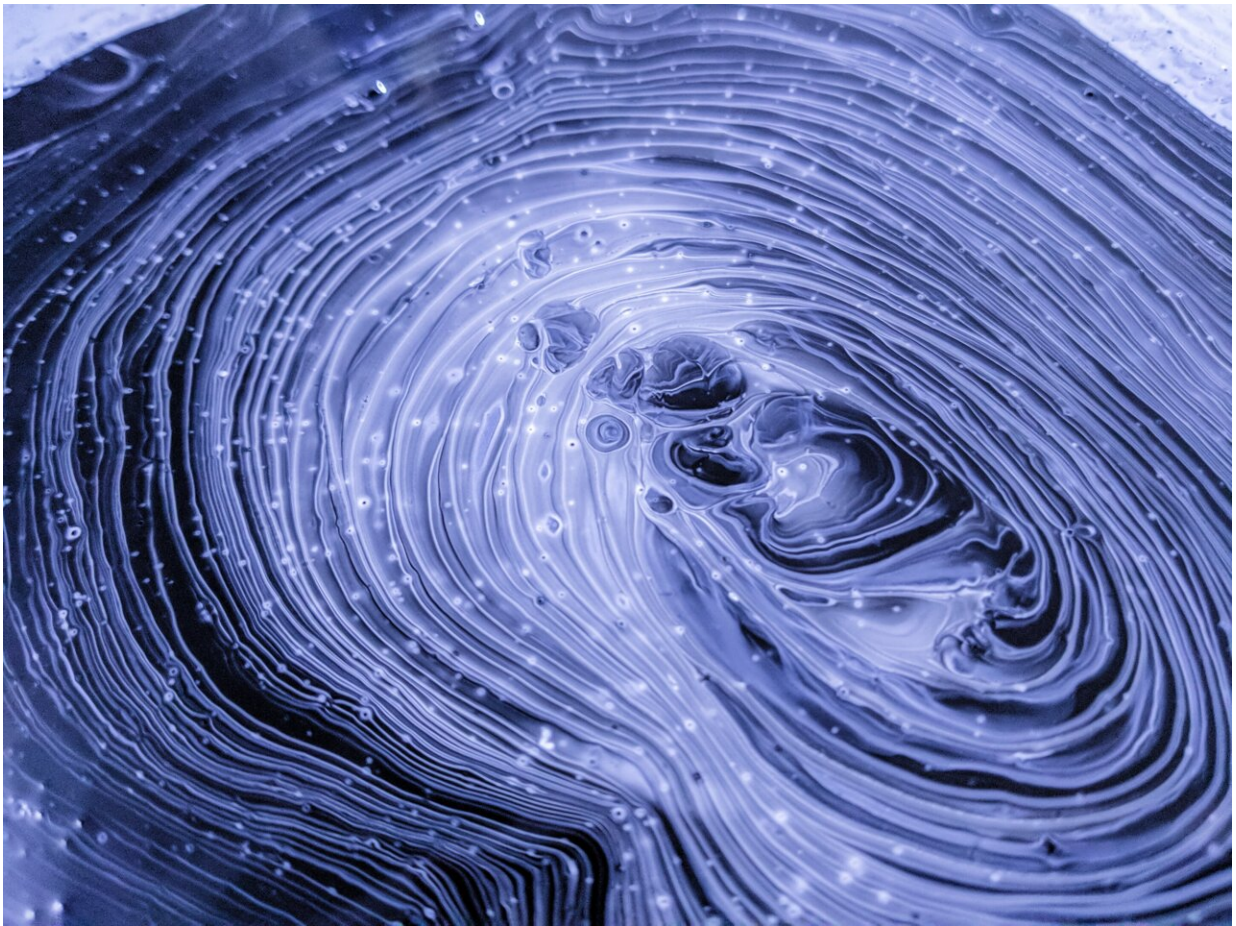


Inclusive child care in British Columbia must support children with disabilities, say researchers

March 6 2023, by Alison Gerlach and Janet Newbury



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In 2022, we spent several months listening to parents of young children with support needs as part of [our study](#) about inclusive and equitable child care in British Columbia.

Parents whose children have disabilities, complex health conditions or behavioral differences have been advocating for years for their children to have the opportunity to learn and play alongside their peers in early learning and [child-care](#) programs.

In light of that, it was difficult for us to hear the complete absence of their voices in December 2022, as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and B.C. Premier David Eby celebrated [new measures](#) to make [child](#) care affordable in B.C.

Equitable access to child care requires that governments address the need for affordability and inclusion of all children, regardless of their abilities. Such initiatives need to bring about just conditions for all children, otherwise they are not just or fair.

Inequitable child care

The UN [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), which Canada [ratified](#) in 1991, states that children with disabilities should "enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community."

In response to years of government inaction in B.C. on inclusive child care, Inclusion B.C. initiated a [Kids Can't Wait](#) campaign in 2016. This created a forum for parents' voices on the structural changes needed to advance inclusive child care in this province.

That was seven years ago. Since then, the B.C. government has launched a range of [piecemeal measures](#) primarily focused on advancing

accessibility and affordability. These measures have had positive impacts for some children and families. However, their stated vision for inclusive child care for all families and children has yet to be realized.

What does advancing accessibility and affordability mean when there is a serious [shortage of early childhood educators in B.C.](#), when 'special needs' training for early childhood educators is optional, and when there is no clear provincial framework or imperative for inclusion?

It means that children with support needs are systematically left out. It also means there are an increasing number of [parent advocates](#) whose families' lives have been turned upside down as a result of their [children being excluded](#) from [early learning](#) and child-care programs.

Making child care more inclusive

The B.C. government has stated its intention to build inclusion into the existing child-care system. Adding on inclusion in this way risks that the ableist foundations of this system will stay in place.

As they grow, children denied child care because of their 'differences' may continue to face similar situations: in [schools](#), [employment settings](#) and [their everyday lives](#) where decisions are made and inclusion is an optional add-on. That is, unless we commit to doing things differently.

The parents who participated in our study understand the discrimination their children experience, as well as what would make a positive difference. Their perspectives are extremely important to informing an inclusive system.

However, the burden of advocacy work should not be theirs to shoulder. They are already navigating a complex set of challenges while raising their families and making a living. To then have to do the emotional and

time-intensive labor of trying to convince governments that your child matters is beyond what any parent can be expected to do.

Child-care centers should have better [adult-child ratios](#). Activities need to be responsive to diverse needs and abilities. Early childhood education curricula must foster knowledge and skills for including all children in routine programming. Importantly, educators should be well compensated to maintain a stable workforce and quality programs. Funding models should include support for program-level inclusion and policies must support inclusive practices.

This is all possible. Several participants in our study shared what it felt like when they finally found child care that included their children. As one parent stated, having their son in a child-care program was "like an extension of our family." The parent added: "I can trust them. It just shows you how it can be when you have the right people doing the right thing with the right education and experience. It works really well."

Regardless of whether our [children](#) need support, or whether we are parents at all—we can all recognize that advocating for equitable child care is something that will make a real difference in our communities. What might we accomplish if we made child-care programs a starting point for overturning the [ableist norms](#) and assumptions that underpin so much in our society today?

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