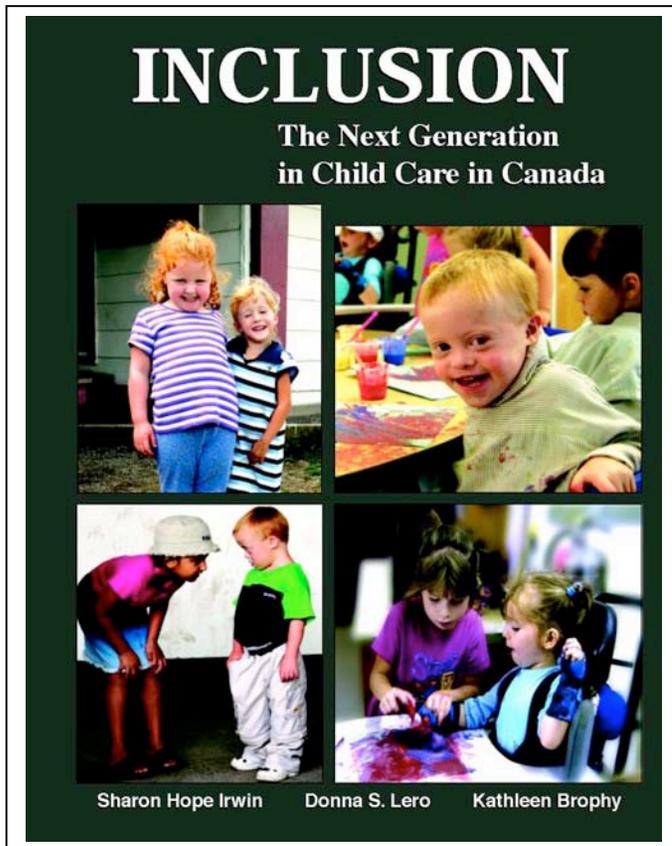


Annual Report

April 1, 2003 – March 31, 2004



SpecialLink

The National Centre for Child Care Inclusion

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Background

In 1990, after fifteen years of frontline experience in developing and directing an inclusionary child care centre and influencing collateral training in early intervention and child care as well as provincial policy direction, and with substantial *ad hoc* experience and knowledge of the Canadian child care community, **SpecialLink** “went national”, taking that unique knowledge across Canada. Under the *Child Care Initiatives Fund*, *Child Care Visions* and the *Social Development Partnerships Program*, through research, resource support, networking, centre visits, conferences and workshop presentations, as well as a presence at many provincial and federal policy tables — **SpecialLink** became identified as the premier Canadian service for and about child care inclusion.

Although **SpecialLink** operates out of Sydney, Nova Scotia, it is a national presence, with affiliates and members across Canada. Its 800 number, web site, and e-mail address assure that it is anywhere it is needed in Canada. There are no boundaries to the hours at which the telephone line is answered or the e-mail accessed. Over six hundred child care centres and agencies participate in its inclusion network. Newsletters and bulletins go to over 4,000 child care providers, centres, trainers, early interventionists, family resource sites, government officials, and related health professionals. Earlier **SpecialLink** newsletters and published articles are re-printed, and are mailed to members and other interested parties upon demand. Seven major publications and a video are currently in print, with one (*In Our Way: Barriers to Full Workforce Participation Experienced by Parents of Children with Special Needs*) in a second printing to meet demand across Canada and the United States. University and college ECE professors across Canada frequently request permission to use **SpecialLink** articles as tools in their courses or syllabuses. Networking is strengthened by face-to-face contacts that are often piggybacked on child care centre research site visits and/or on conference presentations by Dr. Irwin.

SpecialLink's research role is strengthened through an ongoing collaborative partnership with professors Donna S. Lero and Kathleen Brophy of the University of Guelph's Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition and with the Roehrer Institute. Other public and private partnerships including the University of Toronto's Child Care Resource and Research Unit, the Canadian Association for Community Living, the University College of Cape Breton, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, and the Isaak Walton Killan Children's Hospital bring additional talents and resources to its work.

Activities

MEASURING INCLUSION PROGRESS (MIP)

SpecialLink's current major research project started in September 2003 and ends in May 2006. This project has been funded by the Social Development Partnerships Program, Department of Social Development, Government of Canada. The primary goal of the project is to develop several easy-to-use instruments for measuring inclusion quality, and to achieve buy-in from governments and the field in the use of these instruments, through consultations, workshops and on-line training. During 2003-2004, we:

- Consulted frequently with provincial officials, partner project coordinators & partner project staff in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick & Prince Edward Island;
- Developed forms, coding systems and protocols;
- Collected, verified and entered data from participating centres in the three participating provinces;
- Analyzed data; developed first draft report;
- Updated **SpecialLink** web site on a timely basis;
- Provided resources and information to researchers, government officials, project personnel, agencies, child care directors and staff, organizations, media, parents and student;
- Answered hundreds of calls and emails regarding inclusion issues;
- Participated in consultations regarding children with disabilities, child care and other issues related to children and families;
- Presented at national, regional and provincial conferences and workshops.

BENCHMARKS FOR INCLUSION

SpecialLink's previous federally-funded project ended in November, 2003. Under that project we:

- translated the *SpecialLink Child Care Inclusion Principles checklist* into French;
- field-tested the *SpecialLink Child Care Inclusion Profile* and the *SpecialLink Child Care Inclusion Principles checklist* in child care centres in Kingston, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Vancouver, Montreal, Glace Bay, and Fredericton during January – March 2003;

- developed and tested a workable set of benchmarks for Early Childhood Development (ECD) inclusion, exploring methods of benchmarking the level of inclusiveness in early childhood development programs and services;
- reviewed the literature on existing measurement tools used in policy and program evaluation for inclusion, through a contract with the Roeher Institute;
- conducted key informant interviews with early childhood specialists to assist in identifying a relevant set of benchmarks for inclusive policy, through a contract with the Roeher Institute;
- commissioned the Roeher Institute to produce a publication on inclusion policy benchmarks, which was published as *Inclusivity of the Child Care Policy Environment in Canada: Much Work to be Done*;
- refined the *Child Care Inclusion Profile* and the *Child Care Inclusion Principles checklist*, analyzing their reliability and validity through comparisons with expert knowledge of centres and checks of inter-rater reliability among observers viewing the same sites at the same times. Statistical analysis were performed to see whether the correlations between these tools and ECERS-R are statistically significant, and whether the relationships among the scores on the different tools revealed correlations similar to those seen in our earlier study (*Inclusion: The Next Generation*). Descriptors and scoring methodology were refined in response to suggestions from inclusion facilitators in Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia;
- developed a situational picture of 10 child care centres across Canada that are high on the benchmarking scale for full inclusion of children with disabilities;
- transcribed interviews from the 10 centres and conducted a content analysis of each. The published results of this situational picture will augment the modest literature base regarding survival/retrenchment of inclusive programs, and support initiatives and interventions that seem to make a difference (“promising practices”);
- answered hundreds of calls and emails regarding inclusion issues;
- prepared approximately 80 customized research reports on inclusion issues for students, parents, officials;
- updated web site on a timely basis.
- published *Inclusion Voices: Child Care Directors Speak Out About Including Children with Special Needs*;
- published *The SpecialLink Child Care Inclusion Profile Checklists*.
- published *The SpecialLink Child Care Inclusion Principles Scale*.

YMCA INCLUSIVE SUMMER DAY CAMP ~ 8TH YEAR!!

Locally, **SpecialLink** maintains a grassroots presence — helping community programs more effectively include children with special needs. We regularly consult with child care, early intervention and family resource staff regarding inclusion issues. Each summer, through successful grant applications, we have been able to provide one summer staff person to a child care centre that includes a child with significant special needs. For the past eight summers, we have also partnered with the YMCA to see that children with special needs can be included in their summer day camp. **SpecialLink** applies for funding in March of each year, and is able to hire three or four students for 10-week periods — students who act as “inclusion facilitators” at the YMCA summer camp, enabling individual children with significant disabilities to attend. **SpecialLink**:

- develops grant applications;
- recruits inclusion facilitators;
- trains them intensively;
- trains “regular” staff on two pre-service days;
- monitors performance;
- liaises with YMCA staff throughout summer;
- troubleshoots the inclusive elements of the summer day camp;
- acts as a resource to the students throughout the summer;
- maintains on-going contact with the parents of children with disabilities, scheduling support staff, gathering necessary information, ensuring that families are comfortable with the program;
- develops and oversees evaluation study at the end of summer.

Part of the benefit to **SpecialLink** is its heightened local profile. Another part is the feedback loop of recruiting, training, monitoring, and surveying students and parents. It is very useful to evaluate the effectiveness of our training modules and interventions through surveys of student staff and parents who are involved in the summer day camp. Moreover, we are able to influence the sensitivities and knowledge (and sometimes, career choices) of university students who work as inclusion facilitators and to influence other children, parents and community regarding difference.

Although no administrative funding comes from the student employment grants, **SpecialLink** staff continue to choose to volunteer extra time for this project.

PARTNERSHIP WITH DISABILITY AWARENESS CENTRE, MARCONI CAMPUS

The **SpecialLink** Collection has moved. The large **SpecialLink** collection of books, manuals, journals, articles and videos, on topics related to child care and inclusion, is now housed at the Disability Awareness Centre of the Marconi Campus of the Nova Scotia Community College. The Collection includes all the publications purchased for use by **SpecialLink**, as well as reports and documents sent to **SpecialLink** by federal and provincial task forces, working groups, public consultations, etc. And because Dr. Irwin was a member of the Technical Advisory Committee to Child Care Visions, she received complimentary copies of numerous books, reports and videos produced through projects funded by HRDC under the Child Care Initiatives Fund, Child Care Visions, and Social Development Partnerships. These, too, are housed in the **SpecialLink** Collection.

While some students have found their way to our Cottage Road office, we wanted to see that this large and unique collection was more accessible to students, parents, disability organizations, local researchers, child care advocates, directors and staff, medical personnel, etc. The Disability Awareness Centre is able to provide shelving, desks, computers, tables, video equipment — and library staff — to facilitate broader utilization of the collection. The **SpecialLink** library database will continue to be developed in-house, but will have an on-line presence through the community college. The Disability Awareness Centre has agreed to provide a bi-annual newsletter about the **SpecialLink** collection, featuring new books or critical articles on child care and inclusion. The **SpecialLink** Collection will be maintained as a unit, and will be visibly designated as “The **SpecialLink** Collection.”

PARTNERSHIPS FOR INCLUSION — NOVA SCOTIA (PFI-NS)

In partnership with the Early Childhood Development Services section of the Department of Community Services and the Early Intervention Network of Nova Scotia, **SpecialLink** has taken a lead role in the development and evaluation of the PFI-NS initiative. Under this initiative, five staff (one coordinator and four inclusion facilitators) support twenty-two child care centres, over a full year, to increase and maintain both their overall quality and their inclusion quality, through a structured, on-site consultation process. The evaluation process has been designed in partnership with Professor Donna S. Lero, of the University of Guelph, to measure change, but also to highlight emerging topics that may create both opportunities and challenges for PFI-NS.

CANADIAN UNION OF POSTAL WORKERS (CUPW SPECIAL NEEDS PROJECT)

In 2003-2004, **SpecialLink's** relationship with CUPW completed its transformation from one of project management and supervision to one of consultation. We are very pleased that the planned move kept the Special Needs Project office in Cape Breton — that Gail Holdner, who had previously worked for **SpecialLink**, continued as its coordinator, and that Family Place: the Cape Breton Family Resource Centre took on the task of being the sponsoring agency. Dr. Irwin presented a workshop at the CUPW Educational in Port Elgin, on children with special needs. She also participated in numerous discussions about the new CUPW initiative that relates to adult dependent children. As well, she continued to discuss operational issues and concerns with the local project staff. In June 2004, she will participate in a think tank on adult dependent children at CUPW headquarters in Ottawa. After seven years under the **SpecialLink** umbrella, we are pleased to see that this project has been spun-off successfully, since we see our major role as one of visioning, pioneering and developing, not as an administrative one.

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS AND CONSULTATIONS 2003-2004

- June 17 (Ottawa): Presentation of paper at *Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD)* conference.
- September 22 (Ottawa): *Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD)* Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Child Care Policy.
- October 2-4 (Vancouver): *Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL)* Annual Conference. Panel presentation on Inclusive Child Care – Creating a Local-to-National Strategy.
- October 27 (Ottawa): Community Inclusion Indicators symposium of *Campaign 2000*.
- November 25 (Charlottetown): *Understanding the Early Years (UEY)* workshop on inclusion indicators; display table.
- November 27 (Port Elgin, ON): *Canadian Union of Postal Workers* Child Care Educational. Three-hour workshop on children with special needs.
- November 28 (Ottawa): *National Children's Agenda* monitoring workshop.
- January 16 (Truro, NS): Workshop on inclusion measures for Partnerships for Inclusion – Nova Scotia (PFI-NS) inclusion facilitators.
- February 2 & 3 (Ottawa): Social Development Partnerships Program consultation.
- March 25 (Halifax): PFI-NS consultation.
- April 19 (Toronto): Integration Project - steering committee meeting at Institute of Child Study

CUSTOMIZED RESEARCH REPORTS (ON-GOING)

During 2003-2004, approximately 80 customized reports were produced for policymakers, media, students, therapists, consultants and researchers. These reports were created from our literature data base, providing an annotated critique of related articles, as appropriate. For example, a student would generally want references to practice, not to research, so we would compile a list of articles, books, web sites and videos that relate to the actual classroom. Students in ECE programs are gently encouraged to use the Web, but some of them need a lot of support — we try to be especially supportive to local students who have no other hands-on materials but ours (as their instructors, the university research librarian and the public library librarian tell us).

1-800 LINE AND E-MAIL ACCESS (ON-GOING)

Our 800# and e-mail address are widely circulated in the Early Childhood Education world, as well as among government officials, agencies, therapists, researchers, advocacy associations, parents, media, and so forth. We received over 900 calls and emails for information, consultation, and advice over the past year.

ENHANCED WEBSITE (ON-GOING)

Our web site was updated this year, providing downloadable versions of two of our books, *A Matter of Urgency* and *Inclusion: The Next Generation in Child Care in Canada*, and the 26-page *Highlights From Inclusion: The Next Generation*. Monthly e-bulletins to a wide listserv group have been planned. These will alert readers to **SpecialLink** events, publications and projects, to other publications and events of interest in the child care inclusion/disabilities field, to related policy initiatives, etc. See www.speciallinkcanada.org.

SpecialLink Personnel

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Glenda Watt — Office Coordinator

Regular Contract Persons — Bonnie Thompson, James Fader, Mike Peters

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