

Improving School Readiness One Village at a Time: Early Years Parenting Centres and Teacher Opinion of 5 Year-olds' Preschool Development Using the Education Development Instrument (EDI)

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"The whole community has a responsibility for these children. The school can help out by saying these are things we find about these kids in the EDI. We, along with other leaders in the community, have to find a way to improve the environment for these kids in the first 5 years of life. And I'm convinced that if you're going to raise the life quality of children 0-5 in Canada, it won't be done by a top down approach by the government saying we should do this or that, it's going to be done community by community. And the results of the EDI can help to motivate communities ... and to be able to work on these issues." (Offord, 2001)

Introduction

In Canada, the issue of the extent to which children are ready to begin formal schooling hit the political agenda, when the 1997 Speech from the Throne committed the country to measure and report on the readiness to learn of Canadian children so that we can assess our progress in providing our children with the best possible start (Government of Canada, 1997). But the question remained, what would we do when we knew? The value of school readiness lies, not in the measurement, but in the action we take from the data. In Ontario, Canada, the establishment of Early Years Centres led to research and action across the province.

Ontario Early Years Centres

In 2003 the government of Ontario established at least one early learning centre in each of the 103 ridings. An Ontario Early Years Centre (OEYC) is not a child care centre or community playgroup although they look just like top quality child care centres. A parent or caregiver must stay with the child during their visit because OEYCs are designed to support both the adult caring for children, and birth to six year-olds.

OEYCs are often the first to introduce young children to routines that give them confidence when they reach kindergarten (infant class) such as circle time songs, crafts and drama centres, especially in rural communities where there are no child care centres. Preschool children also make friends in communities where it can be difficult to find one if you are only three years old. Every OEYC is staffed with early learning practitioners who provide structured activities to improve readiness for grade one (first grade) through early literacy and numeracy activities.

Parents receive support in developing their parenting skills, learning through modelling as well as direct instruction. The sense of isolation that can accompany young parenting is reduced, parent networking is increased, and social connections for families new to the community (or to the country) are sparked. Caregivers looking after children in their homes bring their groups to OEYC as well. The centres offer them themed didactic and interactive Parent Education Programs that parents sign up for at no cost. Parent-Infant Mother Goose, programs for teenaged mothers and positive discipline are some examples.

OEYCs can respond to the needs and character of their own communities in the development of programs in their centres, however all OEYCs are carefully monitored by the government of Ontario to ensure they provide at least the minimum standard services.

"Every Ontario Early Years Centre offers the services listed below. The programs and services are free to all parents and caregivers of young children.

- *Early learning and literacy programs for parents and children*
- *Programs to help parents and caregivers in all aspects of early child development*
- *Programs on pregnancy and parenting*
- *Links to other early years programs in the community*
- *Outreach activities so all parents can get involved with their local Ontario Years Centre"* (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2007).

In 2004-2005 there were more than 2 million visits from children and 1.5 million visits from adults to OEYC programs (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2007). Another component of Ontario Early Years Centres is an early years researcher in every riding. These researchers, called Data Analysis Co-ordinators (DACs), are responsible for providing statistics, analysis and research to their own OEYC, as well as to inform all other agencies serving young children (including child care centres) about socio-economic trends such as young families living in poverty and percentage of lone parent families. It was a revolutionary idea to enshrine a network of early years researchers across the province at the community level.

After the first couple of years, it became clear there was a need to engage the entire community in the importance of the early years. In 2004, the government of Ontario began funding OEYCs to use the Early Development Instrument (EDI), an instrument to measure the development of five year olds across the province.

Why Did They Choose the Early Development Instrument?

The Early Development Instrument (EDI) was developed at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada at the Offord Centre for Child Studies between 1998 and 2000 by Dr.

Magdalena Janus and Dr. Dan Offord (Janus, 2006). The instrument is an 8-page checklist of questions completed by the kindergarten teacher on each child in the class. All children are five years old or turning that age in the calendar year.

The purpose of Janus and Offord's EDI research was to develop an informative, fast, inexpensive tool to measure school readiness (at the individual level) that can easily be aggregated at the population level and used in the community context (Janus and Offord, 2005). This would provide communities with a tool to assess outcomes of early childhood development initiatives and they could also monitor the community's progress at improving neighbourhoods and programs over time.

Janus and Offord's work adheres to a social constructivist ontology, where the environment has an important impact on child development, readiness is relative and the community context is critical (Janus and Offord, 2005). The EDI is not a direct assessment of children, so it cannot be used for diagnostic purposes.

School readiness measures in the United States are most often used to measure an individual child's skills in order to decide what grade to place him or her in (Gredler, 1992). The EDI takes a completely different point of view. It removes school readiness responsibility from the school and refocuses on the community where the child was raised. It provides a broad assessment of a community's children that is meant to lead to universal interventions which partner the school, preschool agencies and the neighbourhood, rather than school intervention at the student level.

From 2004-2006, the government of Ontario provided funds for the Data Analysts to use the EDI to measure school readiness of all kindergarten children in the province. Interestingly, this was not through education budget dollars, but instead was funded by the Ministry of Children & Youth Services who has no responsibility for schools. It represents the largest funding of a study in elementary schools from a department other than the Ministry of Education. The funding even paid for replacement teachers so EDIs could be completed outside normal classroom time. A second round of provincial EDI funding begins in 2007, which will begin to build a longitudinal picture. Ontario is not the first part of Canada to measure the readiness of the entire kindergarten population. The EDI has already been completed province-wide in British Columbia, Prince Edward Island and Manitoba.

Community Example: Kawartha Lakes and Haliburton County

In this Ontario Early Years Centre's rural riding, the largest town has a population of twelve thousand surrounded by thirty eight small villages spread over 6,000 sq km. It takes two

and a half hours to travel from the southern boundary to the northern boundary of this riding and it has a population of 775 kindergarten-age children. The main office governing the schools, the School Board, agreed to have all of their kindergarten teachers trained in the use of the EDI. It takes about fifteen minutes to complete the EDI for each student. Completed instruments were sent to the Offord Centre at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, where the EDI was developed, for scanning and analysis. Standard reports were prepared for the OEYC and shared with the School Board main office. These include system reports and a report for each school detailing whether the five year olds in that school neighbourhood were ready to learn or vulnerable in the following five different domains of development:

1. Physical Health and wellbeing - gross and fine motor skills.
2. Social knowledge and competence - ability to control own behaviour and ability to play and work with other children.
3. Emotion health/maturity - ability to reflect before acting, empathy and ability to deal with feelings at the age-appropriate level.
4. Language and cognitive development - reading awareness, writing and numeracy skills.
5. Communication skills and general knowledge - skills to communicate needs and wants in socially appropriate ways (Janus, 2006).

Schools use these rich data about the children entering their school for planning and the School Board office uses results in tandem with other data to plan allocation of resources for special programs. The Ontario Early Years Centre uses EDI results to plan where to locate new early learning drop in centres and the types of Parent Education programs needed. For example, villages with 10% or more of their five year olds with low Social Competence scores, would benefit from a workshop for parents and children on empathy and social skills.

A study of the outcomes for individual neighbourhoods and how these communities acted on the results with intervention programs is the topic for another study. In this paper we looked at the extent to which EDI results actually reached the wider community. The EDI is not designed for internal program planning. The value of EDI results is completely dependent on action taken by the community, and that action relies on the range of children's agencies and organizations that have access to the outcomes.

The study revealed that the extent to which communities actually change the experience of their young families is directly related to the extent to which EDI results are disseminated. The following chart illustrates this:

Level of data sharing	Who gets the EDI results?	Example of effects
One Tight Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● School Board - head office only ● OEYC - Director & DAC only 	Curriculum changes & internal system planning in schools and OEYCs only, EDI results treated as confidential and carefully guarded. Usually only in the School Report form from McMaster University, little further analysis.
Two The Usual Suspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● School Board - principals but only their own school's data ● OEYC - senior staff ● Agencies with close relationships with the two partners 	Principals receive their own School Report but not data from any other neighbourhood. School Boards do further analysis. OEYCs add SES contextual data and share with senior staff only, in the form of an internal report, still confidential. Senior staff at one or two other agencies obtain general EDI results on condition of confidentiality because they know someone at the Board or OEYC. Their agency uses it for internal planning.
Three Early Years Committee or Coalition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● School Board - all schools ● OEYC - all staff ● Agencies servicing young children (health departments, childcare, children's aid, special ed. agencies etc) 	Principals receive full report including SES patterns for the board, and are connected to agencies to consider partnerships. The School Board and OEYC present EDI results embedded in SES context to a committee of every agency serving young children. This is particularly effective if graphically depicted in maps.
Four The Wider Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● School Board - all staff, parent councils ● OEYC - all staff ● Agencies ● Politicians (municipal, provincial, federal) 	Staff contribute ideas for partnerships with other agencies and schools such as OEYCs situated inside schools in vacant rural classrooms for parent education. Politicians learn much more about their youngest constituents, a steep learning curve for some. Changes in municipal recreation programs and parks for young families.
Five The General Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● School Board - all staff, parent council, school newsletters ● OEYC -all staff, all participants ● Agencies ● Service Groups - eg Rotary Clubs ● The media ● General community (incl. the 80% of taxpayers without children in school) 	Leads to discussion, debate, action plans, community meetings, political planning and commitment for children, fundraising and informed members of the public not normally connected to young children anymore. In British Columbia, Canada a map of EDI results was on the front page of the Vancouver Sun which made early years the 'talk of the town'. This led to a coalition called HELP publishing the BC Atlas of Child Development mapping the readiness of children for formal learning across the province (Kershaw <i>et al.</i> , 2005).

While the chart clearly shows the benefits of data sharing, the major challenge is to release the EDI results in an understandable, positive way that doesn't pathologize the children or any individual school as a 'bad school'. One option is to redesign the neighbourhoods so they do not match school boundaries. After all, it is the communities (the villages or neighbourhoods within cities) that we are interested in exciting about early years, it is not designed for school planning. Removing barriers from the discussion, layering EDI results with SES data, and using maps to depict results focuses attention on

the opportunity for the entire community to improve conditions for their own children. After all, how can a village raise their children, unless they know what they need?

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