

Toronto First Duty: Integrating Kindergarten, Childcare, and Parenting Support To Help Diverse Families Connect to Schools

Janette Pelletier & Carl Corter

The focus of this article is a research and development project underway in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The project is Toronto First Duty, reflecting that the “first duty of a state is to see that every child born therein shall be well-housed, clothed, fed, and educated, till it attain years of discretion,” according to 19th century British social reformer John Rushkin. This quote provided the title for the city’s strategy for supporting young children through six years of age.

Toronto First Duty’s innovation lies in its approach of integrating early childhood services in a school-as-hub model through local collaboration among professional groups and agencies. The primary services are Kindergarten, childcare, and parenting supports with child health, preschool readiness, family mental health, special needs services, recreation, family literacy, and other programs included at most sites.

The project is also designed to inform higher-level policies at the municipal and provincial levels. It is currently operating in five pilot sites in the Toronto District School Board; the sites include the local school and a large group of community partner agencies. An infrastructure system to support the project came together through the City of Toronto’s Municipal government, the school board, and the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, which supports social causes such as early learning and care.

Context

Toronto is a city of many cultures, religions, and languages. In the Toronto region, more than 50% of children arrive in Kindergarten speaking a language other than

English, which is typically the language of instruction in Canadian schools. There is a large number of recent immigrants from many countries in Toronto and its surround. Regions in the Toronto area often cluster into second language (ESL) groups; some examples are Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Punjabi, Spanish, Tagalog, Ukrainian, Urdu, and French, Canada’s other national language.

Not only is the English language unfamiliar to many children and their families, but so is the culture. Negotiating the “culture of schooling” represents one of many transitions for these families. Given the increasing evidence that the preschool years are critical for setting in motion the developmental trajectories for developmental health and well-being (Keating & Hertzman, 1999; McCain & Mustard, 1999; Corter & Pelletier, 2004), it is particularly important to support recently immigrated families during this period, since being disconnected to schools and services creates a vulnerable group of “have nots”—those who have not had the benefit of good preschool learning and care along with supports to families.

Thus, the transition to school is important from the standpoint of the knowledge, skills, and experiences that children bring to school and the supports that are in place to optimize children’s potential. Research has shown that as a result of factors such as recent immigration, language status, and socioeconomic hurdles, many young children begin school at significant disadvantage (Swick & McKnight, 1989). Neither they, nor their families, nor the school system, are prepared for this critical transition. Related to the transition to school is the issue of access to services for childcare, health, recreation, and other social needs.

In Toronto, new families may find themselves unable to find good quality childcare, to get referrals for child health

issues, or to access recreational programs such as athletics and libraries. Even families who are fortunate enough to “get in” may encounter a system, or non-system, of fragmented services that require access through different routes. Many are left without access or give up trying. In order to help these diverse families connect to schools and community services, intervention programs are needed to reach out to these many groups and to make the school a “hub” of community activity and access to resources.

Toronto First Duty is a universal program of seamless care, early learning, and parenting support that takes the “school as hub” model as its focus. It is meant to be a “normative” approach rather than a potentially stigmatizing “targeted” approach. All families, regardless of language, cultural, or immigration status, are encouraged to participate. However, in the five pilot sites, the proportion of ESL families is generally high. In order to make the initial connections, invitations are extended in a variety of ways and languages, for example, translated flyers left in mailboxes, posted in grocery stores, community centers, the local school, and sometimes delivered personally by a member of that language group.

Parents are invited to participate in any or all of the services that are offered at that site. These include but are not limited to: Kindergarten (half, full or extended day according to family need), childcare, parenting and family literacy centers, health screening, empathy and social skills training for children, summer readiness programs, weekend activities, and family barbeque nights. Contact with individual services in the array also brings parents to participate in the wider array of integrated services.

The goal of TFD is to move toward an integrated model of service delivery using five factors as guides: integrated early learning environment, integrated early

*Janette Pelletier and Carl Corter
are professors with the Ontario Institute
for Studies in Education
of the University of Toronto,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada.*

childhood staff, integrated governance, seamless access, and parent/community involvement. The research goals are to describe the process of implementation and to evaluate its impact on children, parents and communities. The research employs qualitative measures with features of case study, design research (e.g., Bereiter, 2002; Cobb, Confrey, diSiessa, Lehrer & Schauble, 2003) and traditional quantitative methods (Pelletier & Corter, 2005).

Related Background Research

There is rising international interest in parent and community involvement in education (Corter & Pelletier, 2005; Davies & Johnson, 1996; Epstein & Connors, 2002; Ho, 2000; OECD, 1997; van der Werf, Creemers & Guldmond, 2001). This attention to parent involvement likewise pervades other supports for children such as childcare, child protection (Kamerman & Kahn, 1997) and health (Crowson & Boyd, 1995; Tinsley, 2002).

In all of these sectors, best practices are those that involve families. In spite of support for parent involvement found in individual programs and projects, it is difficult to find evidence that large-scale programmatic efforts to increase parent involvement in education have actually had a significant impact on student achievement (see Mattingly et al, 2002 for a review). Nevertheless numerous individual research projects have shown exciting benefits of parent involvement in early education (Graue, Weinstein & Wallber, 1983; Jeynes, 2003; Pelletier & Corter, 2004; Pelletier & Brent, 2002).

Parent involvement in schools has different goals and effects for diverse cultural and linguistic groups. For example, we know that English second-language families choose to participate in their child's preschool or Kindergarten education in order to give their child an academic advantage and in order to learn more themselves. English first-language families on the other hand, may choose to participate in their child's program for socialization reasons, both for themselves and their child (Pelletier, 2004; Pelletier, 2002).

We know that many recently immigrated families hope to enhance their children's opportunities for employment and give their children a better life than they themselves had. They view education as a means to accomplish this (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Pelletier, 2002). However, it is often the case that while

newly immigrated families want to make connections, they feel disempowered due to language and cultural differences (e.g., Ramirez, 2003).

The diversity of parent beliefs about education can challenge traditionally held notions of schooling and what that means for home-school connections. Thus different belief systems of parents and schools may relate to the effectiveness of parent involvement programs.

In order to be effective, parent involvement practice and policy need to go beyond *whether* parents are involved and focus on *how* they are involved and what happens as a result. There is surprisingly little research examining how different forms of parent involvement in school alter children's learning environments and how context may affect children's outcomes.

A Canadian intervention effort that included collaborative prevention programs for preschool and school-age children across diverse cultural groups showed that benefits were greatest when there was explicit programming for children and parents (Peters, 2003). Sites with more general or community focus did not produce significant child outcomes. Programs that simultaneously target the home and school may have maximum benefits (e.g., Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001).

Parent involvement in schooling has been interpreted in light of several "models" (Corter & Pelletier, 2005). For example, Epstein's typology model (Epstein & Saunders, 2002) includes partnership activities such as parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community. Some activities require more action on the part of the parent and others require more of the school.

Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) employ a psychological model that includes parent behavior related to the school, personal support for schooling, and cognitive stimulation. Mediating pathways include children's attitudes and motivation. Their model includes teacher reports on both parent involvement and children's achievement. Family demographic factors such as family constellation and maternal education are associated with outcomes.

Another psychological model asks why parents become involved and how parents construct their roles vis-à-vis involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; 1997). Finally, ecological models (e.g., Lerner, Rothbaum, Boulos & Castellino, 2002) examine the complex interactions between

outcomes and process across different levels of the social system surrounding children and families. Outcomes for parents may in turn be processes that affect child outcomes, as we are showing in our current work (Pelletier & Corter, 2004).

Diversity enters this mix when we consider which parents tend to be involved in school and whose children are successful. Factors such as low SES, minority language status, culture, and single parenthood operate against parent-school partnerships (Swick & McKnight, 1989) and potential benefits for children. For example, within families considered to be at higher "risk," those who are better functioning may take up invitations by schools to become involved, resulting in the neediest families being left behind. When programs are universal, parents who are more advantaged may participate at higher rates than parents who are disadvantaged.

Connecting families to schools during the early school years must go beyond simply getting children ready to learn. Connections involve multiple levels of support that target the communities in which families live and schools are built. Research has shown that neighborhoods are a predictor of subsequent school success (Kohen, Brooks-Gunn, Leventhal & Hertzman, 2002). Thus it makes sense to make links within communities, links that bring together families, schools and other services. Using the school as the hub for access to and delivery of services makes sense from a fiscal standpoint (good use of community space) and from an ease of access standpoint (located in every community).

Promising school-based initiatives in the U.S. include Zigler's Schools for the 21st Century (Zigler, Finn-Stevenson, & Stern, 1997), James Comer's school-community approach (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996) and full-service schools (Dryfoos, 1994). These models of schools as community hubs support children and families; Zigler's model includes childcare and other preschool services. Although these models have tremendous promise, it is difficult for schools and other agencies to implement or scale up the models, and changes in state governments can affect sustainability (Levine & Smith, 2001).

Early Head Start provides comprehensive, targeted support to many families, but it is not universally available. Universal access recognizes that all children, including those from middle-class homes, may be at risk for school difficulties (Mustard,

2004). Integration of services has different meanings in different contexts (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). It can mean loose co-location of services with some coordination among agencies. Or, it can mean coordination of referrals through case management (Gilliam, Zigler & Leiter, 2000).

Seamless programs have higher levels of integration. Deep integration may mean common curricula for children and parents, integrated staffing, common governance and funding. Organizations themselves can become integrated (Melaville & Blank, 1996). A question for research is whether levels of service integration relate to impact on family involvement at the school.

This leads us to our research on the Toronto First Duty project which aims to offer universal integrated early childhood care, education, and community services in a school as hub model to the ethnically and culturally diverse families who live in the city of Toronto. It should be noted that the project model is intended to be universal rather than targeted, but with special attention to outreach and uptake by all.

Participants

All levels of the Toronto First Duty initiative from governments, participating agency partners, school board officials including directors, consultants, principals, teachers, teaching assistants, parenting workers, early childhood educators, community members, other front line practitioners, parents, and children are included as participants. The research team itself acts as participant observers who provide regular formative feedback as well as summative reporting.

Across the five sites, there are currently approximately 1500 families who use some aspect of a Toronto First Duty service. The number of front line staff varies from site to site; for example there are between 2 and 13 Kindergarten teachers at each site, along with numbers of ECEs, EC assistants, and parent support workers. There is a principal at each school, a site coordinator who manages the program at each school, many community service representatives, depending on the type and number of community partners.

In the initial round of pilot “direct measure” data collection with children, a sample of approximately 75 parents and children participated. The number will increase as the project grows and as parents consent for their children to participate in the research.

Research Design and Questions

Research and evaluation is a key part of the project with support from municipal, foundation and federal sources for a university research team (Corter et al, 2002). The initial research project extends over four years and includes multiple levels of analysis employing traditional program evaluation as well as an innovative collaborative feedback process, carried out with sites, for improvement and redesign.

The goal to develop theoretical understanding of such a process develops through analyses of stages of integration across three levels: program, policy and services, children and parents, and community and public awareness. Another goal is to develop narrative guides that are evidence-based stories that support a scaling-up of the project on a city-wide basis and beyond. Several questions and goals guide the research:

- ◆ What does service integration and innovation mean at each site?
- ◆ From the standpoint of organizational change, describe continuum of integration, with new forms of programming, joint planning, management, funding.
- ◆ How are parents and communities involved?
- ◆ What are the experiences of families and communities?
- ◆ How is community capacity increased? That is, what evidence do we have that parents and neighbors are participating more in establishing school-based services that respond to the specific needs of that community? To what degree do families in the community participate in the programs they helped to establish in the school?
- ◆ What are the direct impacts on parents, children, communities and program staff?

Data sources are wide-ranging and include open-ended qualitative impressions as well as close-ended survey data, intake and tracking data on program use and standardized research tools. Measures include focus groups, meeting notes, site updates, participant observation by the research team, standardized and descriptive environment observations, interviews with key informants, interviews with key groups (front line staff, parents, children, administrators), intake and tracking of

each family’s use of services, direct child measures (vocabulary, reading, number sense, interviews about school) and a new population-based “readiness” measure widely used in Canada—the Early Development Instrument (Janus & Offord, 2000).

Key informant interviews were carried out as the project began, and throughout the process, in order to measure ongoing impressions of key groups and individuals. Research team members attend the overall Project Steering Committee as well as on individual site Management Committees. As data are collected from meetings and interviews they are analyzed and fed back to the sites through a regular reporting process. Information from the reporting serves to guide next steps in the sites’ goals and implementation of new programs, modifications to programs, outreach efforts, collaborations with partner agencies and communities.

These interview and survey data can be clustered into three groups: parents, community and frontline staff. Baseline EDI data on children (community “readiness” scores) were collected at each site in the years leading up to the implementation of TFD. In addition, baseline direct child measures were gathered during the fall of the first year of implementation.. Initial environment ratings were made using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998) along with a direct observation employing running narrative accounts that target use of time, space, people and materials.

These measures will be administered longitudinally to examine the effects of integration on actual learning environments. Finally, ongoing tracking of meetings at the Steering Committees and site programs provides tracking of organizational or systems-level data. Careful sorting and interpretation of these qualitative data allow us to make statements about what works at the more global systems level.

Results

Information and measures collected during the first two years of implementation are being analyzed and provide preliminary answers to the research questions. The results are organized into the following categories: (1) impact on parents, children and communities, (2) impact on frontline staff, and (3) impact on programs and policies.

(1) Impact on Parents, Children, and Communities

(a) *Parents.* Focus groups and interviews with parents show that client satisfaction is high, although parents would like to have more voice in program design; this may include classes geared to adults in addition to those geared for families, for example, computing classes and ESL classes for adult learners. The intake and tracking system provides data on how sites are reaching the underserved and on what services parents are accessing in relation their culture, language and SES. Family demographic data show us how diverse families access particular services.

Survey data to date from parents across all sites show that parents' goals in accessing Toronto First Duty services range as follows: to have their child meet other children (66-88%), to prepare their child for school (47-88%), to become part of a group (42-68%), to learn about parenting (53-59%), and to access child care (27-59%). Parents' most frequently reported concerns are speech and language (39%) and behavior problems (25%).

Given the multicultural blend of the TFD families, these concerns are not surprising. As more families become involved in the research we will begin to analyze the parent data by language and cultural group. Intake and tracking data to date reveal parents' use of Toronto First Duty services for themselves and their children (aged birth-6 years):

- ◆ Public Health Nurse (30%)
- ◆ Library Programs (30%)
- ◆ Family Resource Drop-in (29%)
- ◆ Kindergarten (28%)
- ◆ Parenting Groups (22%)
- ◆ Parks & Recreation (17%)
- ◆ Childcare Centre (13%)
- ◆ Home Childcare (10%)
- ◆ Workshops (8%)
- ◆ Toy Lending Library (7%)

(b) *Children.* Children report that they like the programs, and as found in other research (e.g., Pelletier, 1998), "play" is most salient, both in terms of what they like best and what they don't like (e.g., specific play centers or materials) (See Figures 1 & 2).

Cross-site analyses of Kindergarten children's performance on direct measures at the pretest show significant differences across the five sites (see Figure 3 for example of early reading comparison). We will be able to track children's development across sites over time to examine how access to various services for diverse groups

of families links to changes in children's early school performance.

(c) *Communities.* Since one of TFD's goals is to increase community participation in the programs, it has been essential to foster relationships with community members including the parents who make use of the services. There has been a significant attempt by each of the five sites to place community members with diverse cultural profiles on the program planning committees; however it has been difficult to maintain consistent participation. There is variable community participation across the sites with some sites having higher community involvement in planning. Nevertheless, all sites are working to develop more effective strategies to keep community members active on their committees.

Lack of community consistency is a result of varied interest, facility in English, availability of time and childcare resources, rates of resident relocation and turnover, and, in some cases, availability of transportation resources. All of these barriers must be contextualized in the process of building participation by "adding on" components to an existing structure. Had community members been in on the ground floor when the school board and partner agencies began their collaboration, there may have been more consistent participation from the outset.

Furthermore, there are differences in allocation of the project coordinator's time for community recruitment activities. At this time, only a proportion of TFD sites have dedicated staff time for parent and community work. This has had an impact on cross-site opportunities to identify potential community participants, and to develop community capacity to participate. Outreach to linguistic and culturally diverse community members requires additional effort on the part of the site coordinators.

(2) Impact on Frontline Staff

Survey results from front-line practitioners across all sites are categorized into two areas for the purpose of this report: practitioners' feelings about their work and their attitudes toward Toronto First Duty. There were interesting differences between the early childhood educators and family support workers and the Kindergarten teachers. Whereas 88% of ECEs and 67% of family support workers reported that their colleagues shared resources and ideas, Kindergarten teachers reported this significantly less often. Most front-line staff are satisfied with their work environment.

Figure 1

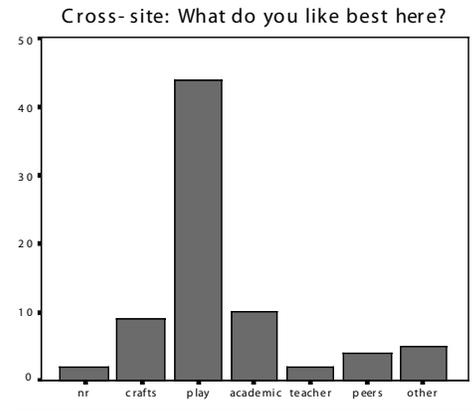


Figure 2

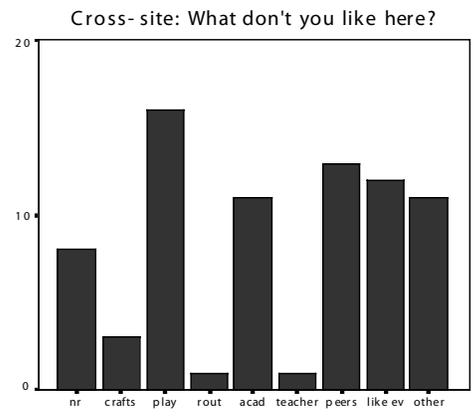
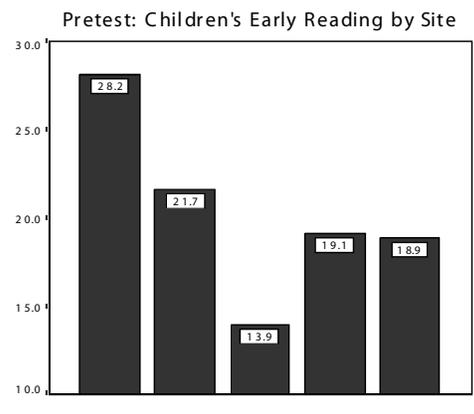


Figure 3



Kindergarten teachers and ECEs feel that their opinions are solicited whereas family support workers do not. In their attitudes toward the Toronto First Duty initiative, all practitioners report that parents are enjoying the programs and services. They report that children are benefiting in terms of social development but not necessarily academic development—yet. The ECEs and family support workers agree that parents are benefiting, whereas the Kindergarten teachers agree less that parents are benefiting.

Theory to Practice: Research, Models, & Projects

ECEs (77%) believe that they themselves benefit professionally from working in an integrated early learning environment, whereas only 39% of Kindergarten teachers report that they benefit from the TFD project. Most front-line staff support an integrated services model—99% of ECEs, 91% of family support workers, and 57% of Kindergarten teachers. Frontline staff report that they want more joint professional development opportunities, particularly those that deal with parent involvement and diversity.

(3) Impact on Programs and Policy

Program data include environment observations which employed the ECERS-R (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998). There was significant variability both across and within sites in quality ratings. Each site received two observations of “spaces” that provide integrated early childhood services.

The parenting and family literacy centers were chosen as a common space across sites; in addition, each site chose one other space to be rated, for example, Kindergarten, preschool readiness room, child care or others. Figures 4 and 5 show the variability in ECERS subscale ratings within one site. We will be able to measure change in environment quality over time and to provide feedback to individual sites about how program modification to increase levels of integration affect environment quality ratings.

Professional and organizational change has been charted through meeting notes, site documents, interviews and surveys with staff. Detailed case studies of each of the five sites were produced at the beginning of the project (e.g., Corter et al, 2002) and are updated in subsequent semi-annual progress reports. Professional change and challenges are a key focus;

strategies are developed at the site and steering committee levels to overcome the inevitable challenges of merging professional cultures, such as Kindergarten and childcare. We have found that opportunities for frontline practitioners to meet must be made in order to develop trust and understanding. It is also crucial for project-wide knowledge to be shared in workshops and interactive websites.

The question of whether the research contributes to the knowledge-building at program and policy levels is answered both qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitative data from interviews, surveys, and meetings can generally be clustered into three areas related to success: building relationships, using the school as hub for integrated early childhood services, and forming collaborations with partner agencies.

Building relationships takes time to clarify professional identities, to form a joint understanding of integration, to share information, plan and reflect, to consider hiring practices and joint professional development. Relationship-building with culturally and linguistically diverse families is particularly critical, a finding supported in previous research (Pelletier, 2002).

The policy issue of grassroots level of community involvement, rather than imposed top-down organization is one that has yet to be resolved as both pieces are important; yet “buy-in” is critical to making integration work. A second area of success for meeting the needs of diverse families is the school as hub model. Making this work requires strong school leadership in the role of the principal, with support from school board officials such as superintendents, facilities staff, and teachers. Flexibility, willingness to share space and roles are crucial.

In this vein, research feedback acts

as a source of support and local empowerment. Collaboration with partner agencies is key to integration. This means conscious attention to within-agency and across-agency collaboration, with the site coordinator at the school able to facilitate integration with school schedules and policies.

Jane Bertrand, a member of the research team, designed a quantitative measure of integration—the Indicators of Change. Using the five service delivery factors described earlier, levels of implementation are portrayed graphically. Sites articulate their long-term integration goals in each of the five areas—early learning environment, early childhood staff team, integrated governance, seamless access and parent participation—then through a process of self-study, report on their current stage (level 1-level 5) at each time point in the research. The levels move from co-existence of services, to coordination of services, to collaboration (2 levels), and finally to integration. It is recognized that the goals for each site may differ and some may not achieve total integration in all five areas (see Figure 6 for an example of the Indicators of Change).

Summary of Project and What We Have Learned

We are pilot testing an early childhood integrated services model to meet the needs of the diverse families in the Toronto region. At five pilot sites in the Toronto District School Board, the school is a hub of community partnerships that provide seamless Junior and Senior Kindergarten, childcare, parent support, health and other services for young children and their families.

There is active outreach to the diverse families in the community to welcome them onto the planning committees so that services are geared to specific community needs. It is intended that the model be scaled up & adapted to other local contexts. The evidence to date is more process than outcome, although outcomes such as parents’ access to school-based services and indicators of change may be considered “processes” that lead to the next stage of outcomes.

Professional and organizational change are processes that may lead to concrete outcomes in family functioning. The research project operates at many levels, including a meta level—the study of the self-study process in setting and implementing goals. It describes the implementation and outcomes at three global

Figure 4

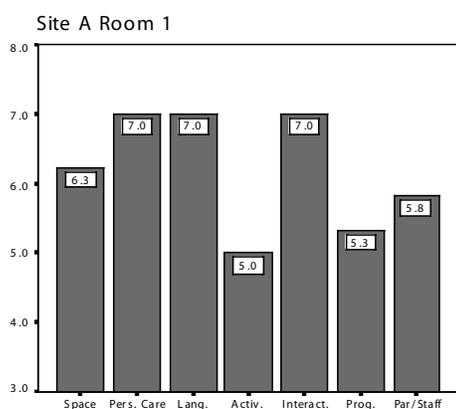
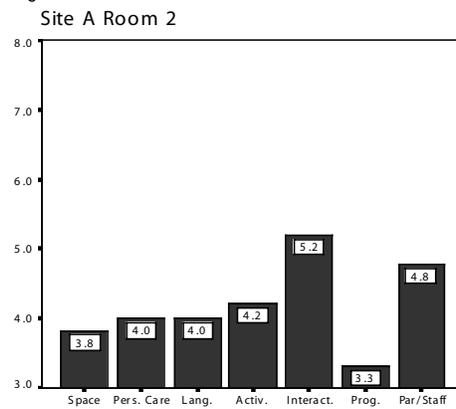


Figure 5



levels: child and family, community, and programs and policy. To date we see wide variability across sites at all these levels.

For example, children's baseline developmental outcomes in vocabulary, early reading, and early mathematics understanding are significantly varied across sites. We may ultimately see an impact on children's "gain scores" at the individual child and school levels as increasing numbers of families are empowered. This empowerment may take the form of increased on-site and/or at-home involvement, of voicing needs and opinions, of becoming instrumental agents of change in the school and community.

Both individual child measures and population-based measures such as the Early Development Instrument (Janus & Offord, 2000) will reflect pockets of strength and need in communities. To date there is wide variability in environment ratings, even in programs within sites. We will be able to articulate how linking diverse families to schools in turn changes environments and makes a difference in children's academic and social development.

We have learned from surveys and interviews that parents strongly support this initiative. As they become more familiar with and use the services available in their local community, parents in turn provide input to local governments and policy-makers about the ways their lives have improved; for example, optional full-day childcare and Kindergarten means that parents are able to find fulfilling employment or educational opportunities.

Parenting programs in the school mean that teachers, parents and parenting support workers collaborate to optimize children's development, for example establishing a shared understanding of the family's culture and home language. Neighborhoods are strengthened as communities of diverse families are building capacity to access services, including school, through building knowledge. And we know from research that stronger neighborhoods have children with improved developmental outcomes (Kohen et al., 2002).

We have learned that it is possible for early childhood educators, Kindergarten teachers and parenting support workers to collaborate as a "staff team" but that there are longstanding professional differences that must be aired through regular team meetings. This kind of collaboration requires change at administrative and policy levels to provide opportunities for shared professional development and ongoing discussion.

Figure 6: The Indicators of Change

Indicators of Change	Early Learning Environments						Early Childhood Staff Team					Governance					Seamless Access					Parent Participation				
	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.5	4.1	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.5	4.6	5.1	5.2	5.3	5.4	
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Integration - Level 5																										
Collaboration - Level 4																										
Collaboration - Level 3																										
Co-ordination - Level 2																										
Co-existence - Level 1																										
<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">June 2005</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">June 2003</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Starting Point</td> </tr> </table>	June 2005	June 2003	Starting Point	1.1 Curriculum Framework 1.2 Pedagogical Approach 1.3 Daily Schedule & Routines 1.4 Use of Space 1.5 Children's Development & Progress 1.6 Program Quality	2.1 Program Planning & Implementation 2.2 Behaviour 2.3 Roles & Responsibilities 2.4 Staff Development	3.1 Decision-making 3.2 Allocation of Financial Resources 3.3 Service Planning & Monitoring 3.4 Program Policies 3.5 Human Resources	4.1 Capacity 4.2 Child Care Provision 4.3 Child Care Affordability 4.4 Intake, Enrolment & Attendance 4.5 Responsiveness to Community 4.6 TFD	5.1 Parent Input 5.2 Parent Participation in Programs 5.3 Parenting Capacity 5.4 Relationship With Families																		
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We have learned that challenging systems-level organizational change must in turn be anticipated. School principals take on new leadership roles in facilitating on-site service integration including working symbiotically with agencies that provide childcare services. For example, childcare staff and Kindergarten teachers “share” children in a seamless full-day program. Administrative leadership must allow flexibility in the regulations that legislate specific programs.

This continues to be a major focus of Toronto First Duty’s work and the research is capturing the ways in which it is occurring at the five pilot sites. Finally, we have learned that the research itself must be non-traditional in order to understand the complexity of community initiatives that link diverse families to schools.

As a research team, we must think outside of our own boxes to encourage, accept and interpret a much wider range of data—in essence to do “evidence-based story-telling.” We hope that these stories will help other communities to find ways geared to their specific needs to provide young children and their families with the best possible start in life.

How Others Might Use the Toronto First Duty Story

Increasingly, we hear the need to build relationships among schools and communities (Boethel, 2003) and to provide seamless early learning and care for young children and their families (e.g., Brauner, Gordic, & Zigler, 2004; Mathien & Johnson, 1998). Toronto First Duty is an initiative that aims to do just that. It is a model of integrated early childhood supports that features the school as the hub.

This model may be particularly helpful for families of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds because they are able to connect with their communities and services in a “one-stop-shopping” fashion, without having to negotiate a non-system of fragmented services that often requires more sophisticated knowledge of the system and its language. We know from our research that this model is desired by families, is strengthening communities, is breaking down previously-held professional barriers between childcare and education and is reshaping the role of schools. However the process is complex and includes professional and organizational change that take time.

Furthermore, this kind of model requires technical support, for example

frontline staff want shared professional development about diversity and how to involve families. It is important to recognize that this model cannot just be “pushed down,” but there needs to be buy-in from interested communities where services geared to specific neighborhood interests bubble up from a common steering committee.

There needs to be community/parent representation on steering committees that include frontline staff, school and district administration, and technical support staff. Often translators are required; in our project, other parents are often willing to serve in this role. There needs to be flexibility in district regulations that guide care, education including special education, parent support, community and health services.

We also believe that the role of ongoing research is critical to the knowledge-building of schools and communities through a continuous feedback and evaluation process that builds trust and a shared mission of linking all families to schools. For those of us who teach future teachers, it is imperative to include in our curriculum and in our practicum component, a strong emphasis on partnerships with families in general and with diverse families in particular. Exemplary models of joint seminars that bring together multi-disciplinary groups for pre-service training need to be accessed across schools of professional education and across countries.

It is our hope that our future teachers will see education not as needing to cover curriculum expectations that children must meet, but as a partnership with families in which the school is the hub of the community.

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