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Inside

2 The Many Faces of School Readiness

3 EDI: A Measure of School Readiness

4 School Transition Programs across Canada

6 Welcome to the Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre

Canadians Are Siding with Erasmus!

by Richard E. Tremblay, ECLKC Director

Over many centuries, education specialists have argued about the importance of early childhood learning. During the age of Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who is still for many *the* reference on children's education, argued that formal schooling should not start before puberty. He argued that traditional education, especially book reading, only teaches children to imitate others. He convinced many that a child will learn to be independent only by interacting with nature. But he was not the first to suggest postponing formal education until puberty.

More than two hundred years earlier, in 1529, Dutch theologian Erasmus wrote the following to a friend who had become a father: "I must offer you one piece of advice . . . Do not follow common fashion and opinion by allowing your son's first years to pass by without the benefits of instruction and by deferring his first steps in learning to an age when his mind will already be less receptive and more subject to grave temptations.…[Y]ou ought not to pay attention to those …who maintain out of a false spirit of tenderness and compassion that children should be left alone until early adolescence, to be pampered in the meantime by their dear mothers and spoiled by nurses."

When compulsory free elementary education was widely established in the mid-19th century, Erasmus had won only half of his battle – the "age of reason" (six to seven years) was generally chosen as the appropriate learning age. But Erasmus's ideas are gaining ground. In some countries, such as France and Ireland, children start school at three years of age. In Canada, the majority of the population appears to be siding with Erasmus. In a recent national survey by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), 76% of Canadians agreed that governments should take responsibility for providing learning opportunities to children in the first five years of life.

I believe the CCL could have a major contribution to making Erasmus' dream come true in Canada. The Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre (ECLKC) will certainly do all it can. We are pursuing four major objectives:

- to bring together the best scientific knowledge on the conditions that foster learning in children from conception to age five;
- to identify the work that Canadian researchers could carry out to improve scientific knowledge about the conditions that foster learning in young children;
- to identify the best ways of monitoring the progress of learning outcomes in order to inform Canadians; and
- to transfer this knowledge to the general public who is likely to improve the conditions that foster early learning.

It remains to be seen whether or not the provincial and federal governments will go as far as establishing centres for early education so that we do not continue to do what Erasmus was condemning 500 years ago: defer hundreds of thousands of Canadian children's first steps in learning to an age when their minds are less receptive.

The Many Faces of School Readiness:

Aspects of child development that influence school transition

A US study by the National Center for Early Development and Learning[1] shows that according to teachers, almost half of children entering school experienced some difficulty with the transition to kindergarten. For many children, it can be an overwhelmingly new experience; for some, it is their first exposure to a structured learning environment, away from the familiar comfort of home or family care. These early experiences that children have in school can influence their long-term cognitive and social development outcomes, their later school achievement and even instances of high-school dropout. So it is not surprising that much research has been dedicated to examining the various factors involved in children's school readiness.

Defining School Readiness

Despite much investigation, or perhaps because of it, there is no single definition of school readiness. The idea of what it means to be ready for school varies widely among teachers, parents and policy-makers. Results from one study[2] show that teachers and principals typically value children's ability to engage in meaningful interactions and consider strong social and interpersonal skills to be important factors of school readiness. In a survey of US kindergarten teachers and parents conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics,[3] teachers identified "ready" children as those who are physically healthy, well-rested and well-fed; able to communicate needs, wants and thoughts verbally; and curious and enthusiastic in approaching new activities. Less importance was assigned to literacy or numeracy.

However, this survey reveals that parents consider academic abilities, such as knowledge of counting or the alphabet, to be indicative of their child's readiness for school. It also notes that legislators (i.e., those who create and implement educational practice and policy) value children's ability to perform specific pre-academic tasks, such as knowing the alphabet, paying attention and writing with pencils.

"Positive peer relationships foster positive feelings about school and increased school engagement, both of which are important early predictors of achievement."

Each of these definitions finds a certain support in the research carried out on the subject. Definitions of readiness can include children's cognitive skills, literacy, numeracy, social skills, self-regulatory skills and age. Early and intensive teaching that focuses on expressive and receptive vocabulary, literacy and numeracy is important. But school success is not defined by academic achievement alone; it is a multifaceted concept that also includes supportive social relationships with teachers and peers, feelings of comfort and happiness in the classroom, a positive attitude about school and learning and active participation in classroom activities.

Relationships Matter

All children bring their own characteristics and personalities into the classroom. Their individual attributes, including age, gender, aptitude, language and prior experiences, shape the way they form relationships with teachers and classmates. Whether a child is independent, autonomous, curious, aggressive or kind will influence the types of ties they will form in the classroom and could set them on a path for later success or difficulty in school. Children assume certain roles in their interactions during work and play times. Whether they are active or passive, cooperative or argumentative, helpful or demanding may determine the nature of their relationships with both classmates and teachers. For instance, children who display early aggressive or anxious-withdrawn behaviour will likely have more difficulty establishing positive relationships in school. This can lead to chronic problems with peer relationships that affect school adjustment throughout the early grades.

The Pathways research project, an ongoing US study that follows children and families through the children's progress and adjustment as they enter kindergarten, explores the stability of these early roles. It has found that the types of relationships children form in kindergarten continue for many years afterwards. Peer acceptance, peer rejection and mutual friendships are moderately stable to grade 6. Victimization, more than the other relationships, results in problems with emotional adjustment.

Behaviour and relationships can also have an impact on the ways children engage and participate in the school environment. Positive peer relationships

foster positive feelings about school and increased school engagement, both of which are important early predictors of achievement. Children who have positive feelings about school and who participate actively in classroom activities show much higher gains in achievement than do children who do not.

While cognitive and social skills have been shown to be important facets of successful school transition, the impact of age on school adjustment is less clear. Age can mark a child's level of maturity or cognitive, social and self-regulatory development; however, the benefits of entering school at an older age diminish over time. So the age of school entry has little effect on long-term success in school.

It is tempting to focus on the influence of one or two elements of child development on school transition; however, this may not sufficiently describe a child's ability to adjust to the school environment. A more comprehensive definition of school success recognizes the whole child and the vital, interrelated roles played by social as well as cognitive skills, a child's engagement in and attitudes toward school, as well as academic progress and achievement.

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EDI: A Measure of School Readiness

The Early Development Instrument (EDI) measures children's readiness to learn at school. It provides a snapshot of children's development as they begin school, examining their ability to benefit from learning opportunities offered by the teacher and the school and to rise to the challenges of school life, such as getting along with peers and being attentive in class. The EDI assesses five areas of childhood development: physical health and well being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge. Kindergarten teachers collect this information by completing a questionnaire for each child in their class after several months of interaction with the child. However, the measures are not used to analyze the outcomes or developmental progress of individual children; instead, the data is used collectively, as a group-measure tool, to be interpreted at the school or neighbourhood level. By using postal codes to chart children's school readiness in different neighbourhoods, communities are able to see which developmental areas could benefit from local early childhood learning programs and services.

EDI at Work

Developed by Drs. Magdalena Janus and Dan Offord at the Offord Centre for Child Studies, McMaster University, the EDI was finalized in 2000. Since its inception, it has been used with over 300,000 5-year-olds in Canada.

Several provinces use the EDI as their main monitoring tool for children's developmental health. The following is a sample of organizations conducting EDI mapping studies across Canada.

Offord Centre for Child Studies

An internationally recognized research centre, the Offord Centre for Child Studies is dedicated to increasing knowledge of children's emotional, social and cognitive problems and finding solutions that improve children's mental health and their future life prospects. It manages Canadian EDI collection (except for British Columbia) and produces related reports for Understanding the Early Years (UEY), a federally funded national initiative whose goal is to provide communities with the means to better understand the needs of their young children and families. With these data, communities are able to develop programs and services that meet their needs. The Offord Centre presents the UEY initiative – and the communities it serves – with quality data on school readiness, family and community factors that influence children's development and local resources that are available to support children and their families. For more information on the Offord Centre, visit www.offordcentre.com.

Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP)

A network of faculty, researchers and graduate students from six major universities in British Columbia, HELP explores new understandings and approaches to early child development. Their ECD Mapping Project began in Vancouver in 2000, led by HELP director, Dr. Clyde Hertzman. The project aims to measure school readiness in children, assess the effectiveness of early childhood intervention, and predict how well children will do in elementary school. Since its inception, it has grown to include all 59 public school districts in the province.

Each district has collected EDI data and had the results and socio-economic data mapped at a neighbourhood level. British Columbia is the first province in Canada to have implemented EDI data collection and mapped its results by neighbourhood. More information about HELP's ECD Mapping Project can be found at www.earlylearning.ubc.ca/mapping.

Healthy Child Manitoba
Healthy Child Manitoba is a cross-departmental long-term child health strategy of the government of Manitoba. It began a voluntary phase-in of EDI in 2002–2003 as part of a provincial evaluation strategy to measure progress in Manitoba's ECD investments. In the first year of the initiative, 24 school divisions, representing over 8,000 children, participated in the EDI, including those divisions involved in the national initiative, Understanding the Early Years. Following this phase in process, in 2005–2006, Manitoba became the second jurisdiction to collect the EDI on a province-wide basis. Healthy Child Manitoba's annual EDI data reports are provided to school divisions, community groups and government departments to assist in planning public investments and school programs to meet the evidence-based needs of children and families. Additionally, Healthy Child Manitoba maps EDI reports, illustrating data at the community level, and shares these mapped reports with Manitoba's 26 parent-child coalitions and the child care community. More information on Manitoba's EDI work can be found at www.gov.mb.ca/healthychild/ecd/edi.html.

School Transition Programs across Canada

As awareness of the importance of successful school transitions grows, the variety of support services and programs to facilitate this transition has increased across the country. This article highlights a sample of Canadian programs that aim to foster positive transitions to school. The programs vary in the number and type of their components and in their intensity. Components range from providing relevant information for adults, to long-term interventions to support children's preschool development and learning, to fostering relationships among parents and professionals and linking the services that can contribute to school readiness. Variations in program intensity depend on the frequency and duration of the program and its distribution over time and child developmental stages.[1]

"The programs vary in the number and type of their components and in their intensity."

It is important to note that most of these programs have not undergone scientific evaluation; therefore, their effectiveness has yet to be determined. Additionally, much critical reflection is needed to determine whether and how these programs should be moved into policy and practice. According to an analysis of school transition programs,[2] effective programs are those that reach out, linking families, preschool settings and communities with schools; reach backward in time, making connections before the first day of school; and reach with appropriate intensity.

Programs that specifically target transitions are not the only way to support children's transition to school. Evidence[1,3] suggests that quality early learning and child care programs support children's transitions to school and create collaborative networks among families, caregivers, educators and schools. For instance, in Quebec, all child care centres – in both facilities and family child care operations (centres de la petite enfance), and day care centres with a permit from the Ministère de la Famille, des Aînés et de la Condition féminine – include an educational component that is tailored to the children's age and the time they spend in child care. The programs are adapted to each child care environment, but all strive to enrich the children's overall development, provide quality educational intervention and offer educational continuity between families, child care establishments and other educational services, so as to facilitate children's transition to kindergarten and foster school success.

Families – integrated services

Toronto First Duty (Ontario)
Launched in 2002, Toronto First Duty integrates regulated child care, kindergarten and family support services in one accessible program located in primary schools. Evidence indicates that it improves children's readiness and parents' involvement in their children's learning and school.

TLC[3]
This five-year early family literacy project (1997–2002) focused on the literacy of both parents or caregivers and children. Funding was used to build on existing programs in seven local project sites across Canada in an effort to support parents' own literacy development;

parents' education of their children and the enrichment of the home literacy environment; and children's literacy (through direct programming). The program also concentrated on creating collaborative links among program providers, academics, educators, policy-makers, parents and other community members.

At-risk populations – intervention to support preschool development and learning

Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) in Urban and Northern Communities/Aboriginal Head Start On-Reserve (AHSOR)
This program provides early childhood development services to First Nations, Inuit and Metis children and their families. The educational component of the program (generally a half-day pre-school program) strives to support and encourage each child to enjoy life-long learning. According to their teachers, graduates of the program show increased school readiness skills.

ABC Head Start (Alberta)
This preschool and family support program targets families with low incomes, offering them four half-day classes per week. Children with special needs can receive weekly visits from a home educator. All family services include a visit prior to the school year from a social worker, who provides food and health resources.

Parents – from more intensive to less intensive programs

Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) Canada Project
This home-based education program requires families to spend at least 15 minutes each day doing activities with their child; support is available through bi-weekly home visits by care professionals and group meetings for parents. A preliminary evaluation of the Vancouver HIPPY program using the Bracken Basic Concept Scale, the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale and the School Liking Interview as measures revealed that HIPPY children performed as well or better than their comparison preschool group.

KinderStart/Bon Départ (Newfoundland & Labrador)
This program presents a series of orientation sessions, where families receive an activity resource bag and suggestions for home activities. Classrooms in the province receive a detailed KinderStart program guide and activity resources.

Welcome to Kindergarten (a few cities across Canada)
This project was created by The Learning Partnership and launched in 2005. It offers future students and their parents or caregivers a Kindergarten Welcome Bag and orientation sessions. Since its beginning, this program has taken a more "ecological approach" and the welcome bags are used to initiate contact between parents and various professionals, thereby creating broader support for children and their families.

Ready, Set, Learn (British Columbia)
This program works to establish positive ties among parents, schools and community. Special events held at schools offer resources, such as an age-appropriate book, a family kit with tips for parents and other information about programs, services or school readiness.

Preschool teachers

CANSTART
This organization publishes a series of booklets to help teachers meet the academic, social and emotional needs of four- to six-year-old children at risk for early school failure. The booklets emphasize the practical application of activities, which can be easily implemented in a classroom setting, to benefit at-risk children.

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Set Sail for Quality on an Ocean of Caring

National Child Care Conference, Halifax, Nova Scotia, June 15–17, 2007

Join early learning practitioners, researchers, consultants and trainers at this national conference organized by the Canadian Child Care Federation and its affiliates in sponsorship with Child Care Connection NS, the Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre, the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development and others. Speakers and workshop facilitators will explore new and innovative means and approaches to enriching the quality of ELCC programs. This is an opportunity to expand the dialogue on quality and to celebrate and learn from each other. There will be pre-conference sessions, workshops, centre visits, a trade show and lots of fun and down-east entertainment! Confirmed keynotes are Margie Carter, Deb Curtis, Dr. Richard E. Tremblay, Dr. Alan Pence, Dr. Peter Moss and Dr. John Bennett. French workshops will be available and keynotes and some English workshops will be translated. For more information, visit www.cccns.org/ocean.html.

Welcome to the Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre

The Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre (ECLKC) is composed of a consortium of organizations led by the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) at the Université de Montréal. Its goal is to help ensure that young children in all regions of Canada and of all origins grow up in an environment that fosters fundamental early learning.

ECLKC examines learning areas that require attention. The following are identified key themes on learning that focus on the stages of child development beginning from pregnancy through early childhood to preschool age: aggression, attachment, brain development, child care, development of math aptitudes, home visiting programs (effects on learning), language, learning through play, learning to read, parenting skills, preschool programs and school readiness.

ECLKC will explore each theme, focusing on relevant questions for parents, educators, service planners and providers, as well as for policy-makers. Our aim is to determine priorities for research, identify best practices and create networks in order to inform the Canadian public, those working with young children and those responsible for services and public policy of the best knowledge on early childhood learning and the most effective services to foster this learning.

Join us online! Learn more about the Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre – our committees, themes and the latest Lessons in Learning papers – at www.ccl-cca.ca/childhoodlearning.

Calendars of Activities for Aboriginal Parents

The Early Childhood sector of the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission (FNQLHSSC) has developed a series of activities for parents and children in Aboriginal communities. The activities, which aim to promote healthy child development in the early years and interaction between parents and their children, have been published in a series of calendars with funding from the Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre. Each calendar is illustrated by a First Nations artist and targets a different age group (0–12 months, 12–30 months, 30–48 months and 48–72 months).

Calendars will be distributed to Aboriginal parents with children in child care or preschool programs. It will also be available to workers in other service sectors to be distributed to parents during home visits.

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Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre
GRIP-Université de Montréal
P.O. Box 6128, Station Centre-ville
Montréal, Quebec H3C 3J7

Telephone: 514.343.6111, ext. 2541
Fax: 514.343.6962

Website: www.ccl-cca.ca/childhoodlearning
E-mail: childhoodlearning@ccl-cca.ca

Editor: Dr. Richard E. Tremblay
Coordinator: Valérie Bell
Writer: Sandra Braun
Collaborators: ECLKC Scientific and Monitoring Committees
Scientific Editors: Amélie Petitclerc, Natalia Poliakova
Proofreaders: Lana Crossman, Anne-Marie Powell-Evans
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To learn more about the state of the field of early childhood learning and development in Canada, read this document, available online:

Cleveland, Gordon, Corter, Carl, Pelletier, Janette, Colley, Sue, Bertrand, Jane & Jamieson, Janet. (2006). Early childhood learning and development in child care, kindergarten and family support programs: A state of the field review for the Canadian Council on Learning. Available at http://www.ccl-cca.ca/NR/rdonlyres/67F194AF-8EB5-487D-993C-7CF9B565DDB3/0/SFREarlyChildhoodLearning.pdf.