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THE LEARNING CURVE

A Report on Early Development Experiences of TLC³

A National Project to promote and improve language and cognitive development in your children

TLC³ = Thinking, Listening and Communicating
Tendresse, Lien et Communication
Tender Loving Care
Tandem: Langage et Communication
The Learning Centres
Theorie en Liaison avec la Communauté

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TLC³ is made possible by a multi-year grant from The Lawson Foundation, based in London, Ontario.

The project is administered by the Hincks-Dellcrest Institute, Toronto, Ontario.

The Learning Centres are located in:

Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

St.-Rémi, Quebec

Toronto, Ontario

Regina and Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan

Vancouver, British Columbia.

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“There is a real sense of the potential to do something significantly positive for young families. That has given us a hopefulness we haven’t had in our work for many years.”

Sue Formosa, CONNECTIONS, Vancouver

1 Introduction

This is about the evolution of a project. Evolution implies growth and change. This project is very much a living thing. It is a bit like a family - inspired by caring, focused on children, sustained by relationships, based in community, demanding commitment and hard work.

Officially, this paper is about the project named TLC³ at the end of the first year of five. Actually, it is less precise. It begins back in 1995 when The Lawson Foundation began looking for a unique way to use its funding to support children and families. It ends with a symposium in April, 1998 when most of The Learning Centres had been more or less in operation since the previous fall.

The purpose of this paper is not to forget. There is a general feeling that we are all learning a lot through the development and early implementation of this project, and if we wait until the five years are up to look back and summarize what happened, some of the subtleties will be lost.... some of the colours will have faded.

So this paper, like TLC³ itself, is about early learning and development. TLC³ stands for: Thinking, Listening and Communicating, Tender Loving Care, and The Learning Centres (Tandem: Langage et Communication, et Theorie en Liaison avec la Communauté, Tendresse, Lien et Communication).

For the purposes of this document, it also means The Learning Curve.

This paper provides only a brief description of the community programs that are the heart of this project because that information is detailed elsewhere. In fact, the Hincks-Dellcrest Institute, which is administering this project, is compiling a wealth of material, including the initial proposals prepared by the sites; the proceedings of two symposia; and a report based on questionnaires filled out by The Learning Centres on their first year of implementation.

This paper contains no hard-and-fast conclusions, but there are some tentative ones suggested. They are not the result of any formal process, nor do any of the partners in this project necessarily agree with all of them. They are simply a synthesis of a range of comments from the people who are closest to the project - the participants.

The quotations that are sprinkled throughout the text are taken from comments made and interviews conducted during or shortly after the second symposium in the spring of 1998. This report is written from the perspective gained from looking back after a year of implementation of TLC³. It loosely follows the chronology of the development of the project.

"We really want to help. And this seems like the right thing at the right time."
Connie Gardiner, The Lawson Foundation

2 The Beginnings

It all began with a concern for the well-being of children.

The Lawson Foundation, a private family charitable foundation, was looking for a new purpose, a new way of approaching its role as a grant-giver. The Foundation is based in London, Ontario, but family members who make up its board of directors are located across the country. What interest or concern could inspire them all?

"What interested us all was children," said Connie Gardiner, who lives in Montreal and who is President of The Lawson Foundation. "We started out with a very, very basic direction. I really didn't know at the beginning how this would unfold."

Some members of The Lawson Foundation board, including Connie, had seen a television documentary on innovative work being done at the Hincks Centre in parent-infant therapy. They wanted to know more.

Members of the board met with experts in the field of child development at meetings at the Hincks Institute and in Vancouver. Freda Martin, Executive Director of the Hincks Treatment Centre and Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto¹ and Clyde Hertzman, who is with the Department of Health Care and Epidemiology at the University of British Columbia, and a Fellow of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIAR), were asked to become advisors to the board in this area.

As advisors, they assisted the board in turning a love for children and a desire to help parents into a set of criteria for a national project in early child development.

The Foundation had provided grant support to children's initiatives in the past, with other partners, said Joan Francolini, Executive Director of The Lawson Foundation. "But this was the first time we had proactively developed a project like this, from concept to implementation."

¹Freda Martin has since retired from the Hincks Centre (in 1998), but remains Director of the Institute, now named the Hincks-Dellcrest Institute, following an amalgamation of two children's mental health centres, Hincks Treatment Centre and Dellcrest Children's Centre.

The development process took several months and a lot of discussion. By September of 1996, the basic criteria were agreed upon:

- The focus would be on language and cognitive development in early childhood. The emphasis would be on promotion and prevention.
- The project would be national, with 6-10 sites across Canada, chosen from diverse contexts.
- It would be embedded in existing programs that had demonstrated the ability to forge partnerships in their communities.
- These would be demonstration projects, not research projects. They would use what we know now to help families and children today.
- The project would help to link practitioners and communities with researchers and policy-makers.
- Evaluation would be built into the project so that results could be tracked and knowledge of what works shared with others.

What was behind some of these criteria?

The board was convinced by the evidence presented to them about the vital importance of the early years of development and the impact of early experience on a child's ability to reach his or her potential in life. "We asked: What is out there that isn't being done that could be done? The advice we got was that knowledge about early brain development needed to be put into practice," said Connie.

The focus or niche that was identified by Clyde and Freda was early language and cognitive development. As Freda said, "Less was being done in this area than in some others, and I felt intuitively that this would be an area that would interest The Lawson Foundation board."

Basic research was not what the board was looking for. "We wanted practical results," said Connie. "We wanted to see something happen in the field." The board wanted something to happen relatively quickly, with a reasonable chance of success. That is why the TLC³ project was attached to or embedded in existing programs that already had a track record and whose staff had earned the trust of parents and the support of their communities including Government.

The focus on partnerships was taken with a view to selecting programs and people who would be able to secure ongoing funding, beyond the scope and timing of TLC³, and generate spinoff benefits in and act as a resource for, their communities. Additionally, it was hoped that TLC³ could help close the traditional gaps between the day-to-day struggles of parents and staff working with children and the more esoteric worlds of academic research and government policy-making.

And finally, the Foundation wanted an evaluation initially to justify its own investment in the project and the benefits which resulted for the children. Over time the focus has widened to include findings that could be communicated to the public, government and professionals, and also give the community sites a way to demonstrate the benefits of their programs to funders and others.

Based on these criteria, The Lawson Foundation board approved a five-year, \$5 million investment in TLC³. The board and its advisors also agreed that there would be a kick-off symposium, organized by the Hincks, with assistance from CIAR, that would bring all the players together.

The Lawson Foundation indicated that it did not want to play a direct management role in the project. About two to three months before the symposium, it was agreed that the Hincks Institute would take on the role of project administration. The Lawson Foundation would contract with Hincks and Hincks would contract with the community sites.

Freda was the force behind the creation of the C. M. Hincks Institute (now Hincks-Dellcrest) in 1986. Her experience, working with John Bowlby, the “father” of attachment theory, at the Tavistock Clinic and Institute in England for many years, taught her the benefits of having an “entrepreneurial arm” attached to a largely government-funded treatment centre.

The Hincks Institute was founded to provide advanced training and research and to be a community resource in children’s mental health in Canada. In 1990, the Institute board and staff, through a strategic planning exercise, decided to focus on social, emotional and cognitive development in the first five years of life and the social systems that surround children in the early years. In addition to training and research, it would create and evaluate models of effective interventions.

Given Freda’s role in both the Institute and TLC³, it is not surprising that the “fit” between the two was a comfortable one. However, Hincks had never administered a national project like this. So Hincks staff set off on their own learning curve.

Part of their new experience was working with community people across Canada, and managing a project that literally stretched from sea to sea. Another part of their new experience was working with a family Foundation, who wanted to maintain an interest and a role in the development and direction of the project.

The relationship with the funder has added both support and pressure. The Lawson Foundation has given Hincks permission to take risks, which has been crucial in this development stage. It also provides ongoing practical advice through its executive director, Joan Francolini. “We have a good partnership with Joan. She brings a lot of expertise. We couldn’t get along without her,” said Freda.

Joan keeps in close touch with TLC³, and provides regular reports to her board on the progress of the project. She and Connie attended the kick-off symposium and the one the next year to get to know the participants and their programs. In other words, this is not a funder who sends a cheque and asks for an annual report. The Lawson Foundation is more involved.

Joan is mainly concerned with how the project will be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of the interventions so that key learnings can be communicated and shared with others. Connie is keeping her eye on TLC³ to ensure that it meets her fundamental goals.

“I don’t want us to get off track from community-based – what is it that’s best for the children and the parents. For too long, we have told people how to run their lives, rather than helping them to cope with the reality of their lives. I really want that development to happen between the child and the program and the parent and the program.”

The board sometimes consults with people outside the project for advice and reassurance that things are on track. But generally Connie puts her faith in what she views as the foundations of the project. “If you start from the right basis and you have good people, I believe it will work out.”

The expectations of the Foundation, both explicit and implicit, have had an impact on its development. “When they (the board) asked: ‘How soon will the children be benefitting? I felt the need to say: ‘next week’,” said Nancy Cohen, the director of evaluation for TLC³. “They didn’t want this project to get caught up in bureaucracy. They didn’t want us to create barriers. I think the sites felt this expectation, and so did we. It shouldn’t have surprised us that things moved so quickly. In program terms, it was zero to 50 in 20 seconds. People seized the moment.”

Goals of TLC³

The main goals of the project have remained consistent, but their expression has been refined and the language somewhat simplified since conception. The goals are to:

- enhance the cognitive and language development of children aged 0 to 5 years;
- provide practical tools for parents and professionals to enhance children's language and cognitive development;
- prepare children for school entry;
- leave the sites with a sense of the importance of evaluating what they do as a way of getting the support of policy and decision makers;
- disseminate information to public, government, and professional audiences in a variety of formats;
- create collaborative links between interested partners, including programs, academics, educators, policy-makers, advocates, parents and other community members.

“You have to be prepared to make it up as you go along. It’s like good therapy – you have to be willing to be changed by the process yourself.”

Freda Martin, Director of Hincks-Dellcrest Institute, Toronto

3 Choosing the Sites

Once the criteria for TLC³ were set, the next challenge was to identify the community sites across Canada. One option was to develop a national Call for Proposals (that crossed all the t’s and dotted all the i’s), wait to receive submissions, evaluate them, and select the most suitable proposals.

That kind of process, across Canada, would take a long time. The Foundation wanted to get moving and there was another concern, according to Freda, and that was finding genuine collaborators with strong community links. “I have struggled with so many of these calls for proposals from government. I know how easy it is to put together ‘instant’ collaborations that do not represent real partnerships.”

A second option was developed by Freda and Nancy Cohen in discussion with Jane Fitzgerald, namely to use senior government officials or government advisors in the appropriate Provincial Ministries to recommend sites which met the Foundations criteria and additionally were seen to be well placed to act as “resource centres” for the distribution of learnings to other communities. Freda and Clyde were given the mandate to go this route.

In identifying sites, the search team made a point of trying to fulfil the criteria of diverse contexts: in living environments e.g. urban and rural, low and moderate income, at risk and healthy populations, and including a Francophone site and an Aboriginal community site; in age groups e.g. infancy, toddlers, pre-schoolers; and in programming e.g. day care, home visiting, pre-school.

Originally, the number of sites was set at 6-10. On the advice of Joan Francolini, from The Lawson Foundation, the decision was made to limit the number to the minimum, with the idea that a seventh site could be added later, when the project had more experience to go on. If gaps were identified, a new site could be found to fill it. That plan is still in place; the additional site is expected to be launched in Alberta in 1999.

“Joan told us: ‘Don’t bite off more than you can chew. This is going to cost more than you think it is, for administration and so on. It is going to be harder than you expect. She was right,’” said Freda.

The six program sites that were chosen were in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia; St.-Rémi, Quebec; Toronto, Ontario; Regina and Meadow Lake in Saskatchewan; and Vancouver, British Columbia.

Why are there two in Saskatchewan? The provincial contact in that province recommended the Regina Early Learning Centre. Alan Pence, who is with the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, and who has long experience working with Aboriginal communities, recommended the Meadow Lake site.

The emphasis on promotion and prevention and diversity in the criteria meant that the sites were not meant to concentrate on children who had already been identified as having developmental disabilities. The one exception was the TLC³ program within the Growing Together project, which is sponsored by the Hincks Centre and the Department of Public Health of the City of Toronto. Growing Together is a universal prevention/early intervention program which offers a wide range of services to all the children under 6 years of age and their families in the St. James Town area of Toronto. It had identified a serious gap in its services for the many children identified in the on site developmental clinic as already having some disability. The Lawson Foundation was considering a grant application from Growing Together to fill this gap when the decision to launch a national project was made. The Foundation suggested that this project be included in TLC³ and the provincial officials concurred.

Choosing program sites would be a major challenge for any national project. For TLC³, how it was done was critical to the development process.

Using provincial contacts to find sites provided TLC³ with a core of key people across the country who are involved in child development and public policy and who are supportive of the project. Several of the contacts who helped identify sites have become enthusiastic members of the TLC³ partnerships.

For example, Jane Fitzgerald, Administrator of Family and Children's Services for the Nova Scotia government, is a member of the National Advisory Committee. Her department recommended, and has worked closely with, the Dartmouth site. Dana Brynelsen, Provincial Advisor for British Columbia's Infant Development Program, is a key member of the team implementing the CONNECTIONS program in Vancouver.

The program sites had to move quickly to respond. They had about 4-5 weeks to conceptualize and map out the general design of a language and cognitive development program to enrich an existing program. They had to write up a proposal that showed how they would use \$80,000 a year in TLC³ program funding and how it would benefit young children.

Being recommended for new funding and the chance to be part of a national project does not happen every day. The fact that the time lines were so tight, and the people being asked to respond were busy enough already was viewed as a challenge that simply had to be overcome. “We sat down and said: ‘How are we going to do this? We absolutely cannot turn down this opportunity,” said Michelle Droettboom, with the CONNECTIONS project in Vancouver.

What is clearer now, in retrospect, is that the flexibility of the project – for which there is much greater appreciation now after year one – created considerable uncertainty and pressure on the people working in The Learning Centres.

The more traditional model, where a local project applies for funding from a program that has a specific set of requirements, often has the disadvantage of forcing communities to fit their programs within artificial and rigid restrictions. But once the local community gets approval for funding, they are usually sure about what is expected of them.

With TLC³, the approach was more open-ended. Sites were told they had been recommended for this project, and were asked to respond with a proposal. As Freida Iron, from Meadow Lake, said: “We are used to being told: ‘Here are the criteria. Here is what you have to do to comply.’ This time, we were given more scope.” Added Rhonda Schultz, also from Meadow Lake: “We were told: Do what you think needs to be done.”

Michelle, from Vancouver, summed up the anxieties this way: “We didn’t know if we were doing the right thing.” What allayed these feelings to a large degree was the second symposium in April, 1998. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

“This is not just a job to these people. This is heartfelt. A lot of personal commitment is going into this project.”

Jane Fitzgerald, TLC³ National Advisory Committee, Halifax

4 The First Symposium: The Launch

You can't really tell from the official proceedings, but by all accounts, the first symposium, which marked the launch of TLC³, was both exciting and somewhat tense. That was largely because the participants were not sure what they were getting into, and many people didn't know each other or what to make of those from other sectors. There was a real mix of participants from grassroots community initiatives, advocacy groups, academia and government.

Everyone was feeling their way, including the organizers.

The purpose of the symposium, held in April 1997, had changed from the original intent early in the fall of 1996. At that time, the thought was to use a symposium as a way to bring people together from the field of child development to help identify the people and programs that would be included in TLC³.

Subsequently, it was decided that having a symposium where community participants felt they were competing for a place in the project would not be conducive to building a sense of ownership and teamwork. Instead, the symposium was used to introduce TLC³ participants across the country to each other, and try to build some bridges across sectors. It was held at the Eaton Hall Inn and Conference Centre, in King City, north of Toronto. Lance Buhl of Buhl and Associates worked closely with The Lawson Foundation and The Hincks team to develop the agenda and then facilitated the symposium.

The goals of this first symposium were to: clarify what each of the sectors had to say to the group about theory or practice in early language and cognitive development; find common ground and build mutual trust; discuss networking and communications; and advance the planning and development of TLC³ in some practical ways by: considering how to incorporate messages from the symposium into project development and management; clarifying expectations, roles, next steps and time lines; and establishing a working basis for agreements with the six sites.

“We had asked for a proposal from each site before the symposium so we could have confidence that these were going to be viable programs that fit with our goals,” Freda explained. “But we also wanted to be able to influence their program design through the symposium.”

The various “constituencies” (they were grouped as researchers, interventionists, policy-makers and parents/advocates) spent time within their own groups talking about their needs and challenges, and there was an effort afterwards to synthesize their messages to each other. The process revealed, for example, the need for:

- a common language, particularly to translate research-ese into information that other people can understand and use;
- a greater effort to bridge the gulf between and among constituencies; and
- better understanding of the basic concepts underlying the TLC³ project;

Mixed constituency group sessions were held to allow people to share different perspectives. There were presentations by Dr. Dan Keating, from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and CIAR, and Dr. Paul Steinhauer, from the Hospital for Sick Children, both from Toronto.

Creation of a communications network, both internal to the project and external with stakeholders, was discussed. There were many questions raised – for example, who would do what; how research advisors would link to sites; how Hincks would support the sites; what the sites had to do. There was a request for “customized” information to be made available and a way to access the knowledge base of the project.

The community program people asked for guidance and validation.

At the end of the symposium, the community sites were asked to revise their proposals to:

- ensure their base funding was not in jeopardy;
- provide overall service plans and budgets for their whole program (not just the TLC³ component);
- set criteria for a fully implemented program in Year 1;
- detail how staff would be trained;
- identify who would be site liaison with TLC³ ;
- incorporate what was learned from the symposium;
- provide specific program objectives and identify how it would be determined if those objectives had been achieved.

“One of the hardest things in the first year was putting the proposal together,” said Rhonda, from Meadow Lake. “We revised draft after draft. We struggled with: ‘What do they want to know?’ ”

The Hincks also left the symposium with some responsibilities for Year 1, including:

- create an internet connection for the project;
- make two person-to-person visits with the sites per year;
- hold an annual symposium when everyone would get together;
- connect advisors (researchers and others) to each Learning Centre;
- share proposals and information;
- provide resources to sites;
- provide evaluation support and advice on staffing needs for data collection.

At the end of the first symposium, some participants were asked if they would be willing to serve as part of a resource group from the academic, public policy, and advocacy communities who would lend their expertise to the project over the next five years. The result was formation of the TLC³ National Advisory Committee.

Among the accomplishments of the symposium:

- Excitement was generated about the potential of TLC³ .
- A dialogue was opened.
- The goals of the project were explored and reinforced.
- A National Advisory Committee was formed.

“You don’t need 500 bureaucrats to design a good program. This project has shown that two or three community people can do it.”

Dana Brynelsen, CONNECTIONS, Vancouver

5 Site Development: Early Hurdles/Early Successes

What follows is a brief profile of each of the six sites, with some comments from participants in these communities about their early hurdles and successes. The comments were made during conversations at the second symposium in April, 1998 at the end of the first year of implementation.

ALI, St.-Rémi, Quebec

ALI – Activités de Lecture Interactive – is the name of the interactive reading program being used in St.-Rémi, a small rural community south of Montreal. “ALI grows with your child,” the magic lantern in the brochure for parents says. There are three little ALI figures flying over the town on a magic open book, symbolizing the three ALI programs – ALI bebe for babies up to 15 months, ALI bambin for toddlers from 15 to 36 months, ALI explorateur and for youngsters three to four years old.

What is the magic? It is helping your child to develop language through interactive reading, using picture books. The books are suitable for each age group. Parents are given instructions and a guidebook on how to use the picture books with their child and encourage the child to tell his or her own story. There is also a periodic progress report on how the child is doing.

ALI-DAC is a detection/corrective action program, aimed primarily at two-year-olds. ALI-action communautaire is a training program for community service providers. The ALI program was developed by Gérard Malcuit and Andrée Pomerleau from the University of Quebec at Montreal. St.-Rémi is part of the 1-2-3 GO! early child development initiative, which is active in several Quebec communities. One of the hallmarks of 1-2-3-GO! is community involvement.

“Working with the community is a challenge,” said Andrée “You must be patient. It is not enough to know yourself what the objectives of the program are. You must discuss them and develop them with the people. In St.-Rémi, people wanted to do everything. We had to decide together what is most important.”

The community's first wish was to put the TLC³ funding into child nutrition and transportation for families. They had to be reminded that the funding was tied to early language and cognitive development. Once that hurdle was overcome, the community responded enthusiastically to the opportunity that ALI offered.

At the official launch of ALI in November, 1997, more than 100 children were enrolled. Having created this demand, the team from University of Quebec at Montreal readily admits they have been scrambling ever since to develop all the materials for each age group. ALI Bambin (the middle group) got off the ground first, with ALI-Bébé and ALI-Explorateur to follow. "We have had to translate very academic stuff into concrete things and simple actions that parents can understand and use," said Gérard.

At first, it was the university team who wanted to move quickly and had to slow down to make sure the community, including front-line practitioners, understood the program and had bought into it. Then, the parents were impatient for these activities that had been promised for their children, and the team has been hard-pressed to respond quickly enough to maintain community momentum.

The time lines for implementation were complicated by a major ice storm that knocked out power to the area for two to three weeks in January, 1998. The storm and its aftermath created a gap of about two months in program development. Other community events were held in the spring to try to re-engage the community. "The community must appropriate the program," said Gérard. "It is interesting to watch the appropriation process. Sometimes you have to step back and not be too much of a leader. We have to do more to keep the community interested in what we are doing so that when this funding is finished, it will be possible to keep it going."

"St.-Rémi is very isolated," said Diane Laberge, a psychologist/social worker with the local health and social services agency (CLSC). "It is not so far from Montreal by car, but no buses or trains come here. There is a big need for this program. We have evaluated a small group of two-year-olds. Of these children, half have significant difficulties in language, and one does not speak."

Lynne Flynn, a parent volunteer and mother of three, said the program is helping to bring the community together around their children. Some parents want to do the program in a group. "People are more conscious that we have to do something about the language of the kids. With ALI, we can say: 'You are not alone. We can help you.'"

CONNECTIONS, Vancouver, B.C.

Parent-child story-telling is at the heart of the CONNECTIONS program in Vancouver. Created with TLC³ funding, the program focuses on infants up to age two, together with their parents. “Many parents don’t realize they should look at and talk to their babies,” said Michelle Droettboom, a speech-language pathologist and CONNECTIONS co-coordinator. “While they are learning, they are finding out how much fun it can be!”

The idea of “connections” includes parents connecting with their child, with other parents, and with professionals, and professionals from different sectors connecting with each other and with community workers and programs.

CONNECTIONS is a collaboration of the Alan Cashmore Centre (a community-based family mental health centre that administers the TLC³ project), Kiwassa Neighbourhood House, the Infant Development Program of B.C., and speech-language pathologists. Kiwassa is located in an inner-city neighbourhood in Vancouver where many low-income and new immigrant families live. It is where the partners come together to make CONNECTIONS.

CONNECTIONS offers a *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program, which uses rhymes, lullabies and stories to develop language and enhance parent-child relationships. New families joining the program are also offered a half-hour session with a speech-language pathologist to ask questions and complete a communication profile of the child. The Hanen *You Make The Difference* program has been modified (with permission) for a 10-week program to promote parental understanding of infant communication development and their vital role in that development. Parents and children over age two will be welcomed back once a year to a Keeping In Touch program.

In the first year of TLC³, 40 families participated and 78 community professionals from across the province were trained in Mother Goose. “We are never empty. At 10:30, there are three or four families, at 10:40 another six arrive, and 10 minutes later, the room is packed,” said Michelle.

“We were told that parents would not come out. But we knew they would,” said Dana Brynelsen, Provincial Advisor for the B.C. Infant Development Program. “It just took off like wildfire,” said Sue Formosa, director of the Cashmore Centre and program co-coordinator (she is also a speech-language pathologist). “What we are doing is very in the moment.”

As more families ask to participate, a concern is how to ensure the families who could benefit most don't get left out. "I have learned a lot this year about the value of grassroots community workers engaging families, as opposed to professionals," said Sue.

There has also been a lot to learn about the complexity of trying to do cooperative multi-agency work, said Dana.² The project is determined not only to connect with parents and infants, but also to influence other service providers who could help promote early child development in language and cognition (through training others in Mother Goose, for example). That networking with other professionals and community groups becomes another task that has to be done. "We had to backtrack at one point," said Michelle. "The public health nurses came to us and said: 'Why didn't we hear about this program?'"

Being realistic about what is do-able is important. "TLC³ is a small portion of our normal roles and responsibilities," said Dana. "While we are doing this, we all have stacks of pink message slips piling up." Original plans have had to be scaled back to recognize the limitations of time, staff and money. Michelle said they still hope to start another site, working with teenage moms.

"We felt such a sense of urgency this first year," said Sue. "I have felt so harried, I haven't been able to be myself. I felt so responsible for the success of the project."

One of the things that makes CONNECTIONS work is the relationship among members of the team. Sue, Dana and Michelle have been friends and colleagues for many years. "We are all very strong personalities, highly trained and connected with a lot of different people," said Sue. "There is a high comfort level with disagreement, discussion is very open, and resolution is always achieved before the conversation ends. We also share a sense of playfulness. It all helps."

² CONNECTIONS was created by formal agreements among: The Greater Vancouver Mental Health Services Society (governing body for Alan Cashmore), the Vancouver-Richmond Association for Mentally Handicapped People (the umbrella organization for the Vancouver Infant Development Program), and Michelle Droettboom, a speech-language pathologist in private practice. CONNECTIONS then entered into an agreement with Kiwassa Neighbourhood House to participate in program delivery and to provide the site location.

Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

Natalie Downey, the speech-language pathologist who is coordinator of the TLC³ project in Dartmouth, was at the preschool one day when the children were free to pick whatever activity they wanted. All the kids ran to the toys and play areas, except for one little girl who asked Natalie to read her a story.

“I sat down and started reading. I was putting a lot of action and sounds into it. All of a sudden, the kids started leaving the sandbox and the kitchen area and coming over. They were fascinated. It showed me the power of story-telling. We can really get kids hooked on language.”

The new programs made possible by the TLC³ funding have also started to draw more parents into the Dartmouth Family Resource Centre, said Lisa Davies, the centre’s program director. And there is no question about the popularity of the new preschool that opened in the fall of 1997. It has been full since day one. The feedback from parents on the parent-tot program offered through TLC³ has been encouraging. They want more.

The Dartmouth TLC³ project, which is administered by the Family Resource Centre, is a partnership of the centre and the Dartmouth Preschool (which is at another site). The area served is North Dartmouth. It has many young families and single parents, especially in Highfield Park, a high-density, low-income housing complex.

The new preschool site has a special emphasis on language and cognitive development. Other key components of TLC³ are: parenting education, parent-child interaction programs, training of staff and parent facilitators, and speech-language consultations. The focus is on children from birth to age five.

In the first year, a major challenge was finding and hiring a speech-language pathologist to work using a prevention model, rather than a clinical treatment model. Now that Natalie is on staff (since early 1998), the challenge is to use her time and expertise as well as possible, since her position has been merged with the coordination and evaluation roles.

In the early going, it took some agonizing and debate to settle on what kind of enrichment in programming could be provided, given the goals of TLC³. The original proposal was revised to put more of a focus on language and cognition. Development took another step forward when Mandy Kay-Raining Bird, from the School of Human Communication Disorders at Dalhousie University was invited to

join the working group to act as an advisor. This project has also benefitted from close working ties with provincial staff in the Department of Community Services.

The TLC³ project has merged with an existing federally-sponsored program (Community Action Program for Children, CAP-C), which makes it stronger and at the same time more vulnerable (to whatever happens to CAPC funding). “We operate with the same philosophy, an emphasis on prevention and overall health and well-being, but there is a challenge in making sure we retain the special characteristics of TLC³,” said Natalie. “But it is a positive challenge – making it work.”

An important part of the potential of this project is training – of both service providers, such as preschool staff, and parent facilitators (a language and cognition component is being added to the facilitators’ program) – to spread the benefits farther. It is hoped that not only will more parents and children in North Dartmouth benefit, but potentially families from across the province.

As Jane Fitzgerald, Administrator of the Family and Children’s Services Division of the Department of Community Services, puts it: “In Nova Scotia, we have to make things stretch. We want TLC³ to be a model that will influence what happens in preschools and family resource centres across the province.”

Growing Together, Toronto, Ontario

More than half the children who have been referred to the TLC³ Growing Together project in St. James Town are Tamil. There are often cultural barriers to be overcome. For example, in some traditions, it is not usual to talk to or play with infants. “Moms hold them and feed them. There is no conversation. It is just expected that the child will talk at age three or four,” said Deirdre McKibbon, the TLC³ resource consultant.

That is why she was thrilled when four Tamil Moms who attended a pilot parent language stimulation group responded so positively. At the end of 10 weeks, they ran the play circle themselves, and brought cake to celebrate. “Those Moms are now saying ‘I want my child in preschool. It’s for children who need extra help.’ They are telling others. The Tamil moms are learning about it in the laundry room.”

The residents of St. James Town live in a dense complex of huge highrises in downtown Toronto. The community is multicultural and multilingual (about 20 different languages). Residents face multiple risks, including poverty, overcrowding, and crime. The birth rate is double that of the rest of Toronto.

Growing Together is a multi-faceted prevention, health promotion and early intervention program that has been running in St. James Town for about three years, sponsored by the Hincks Centre for Children’s Mental Health and the City of Toronto Public Health Department. Public health nurses contact all mothers with new babies in the immediate St. James Town area to ask how they are doing and see if they will accept a home visit. If they do, and needs or risks are identified, the family is referred for assessment and services through Growing Together or other agencies.

TLC³ funding has enabled Growing Together to provide new services to children from birth to five years who are identified as having language, cognitive and related difficulties.

Children who are referred to TLC³ by Growing Together staff or other agencies are given a developmental assessment by a psychologist. They may be referred to a preschool program that runs two days a week, a parent group, or a speech-language pathologist (who was still to be hired in mid-1998). Home visits may be conducted by the resource consultant, preschool staff, and a Tamil home visitor.

“We are lucky we have so many services we can pull in for the families through

Growing Together and our network of other agencies,” said Deirdre. “However, there is a huge demand, and waiting lists for many services.” She works directly with parents, with Nilofar Sleem Liakat, the preschool teacher, and with other community agencies.

“They are little buds who come in to the program and start to bloom,” said Nilofar of her preschoolers. Often, progress comes in small steps. “There is a little boy who didn’t speak, but he is starting to smile at me,” she said. “I get reports,” said Deirdre, “that kids will bring out all their toys and say to mother ‘let’s do circle.’ So I know we are starting to change behaviour at home.”

Space is a challenge for Growing Together. It is crammed into a few basement rooms in one of the apartment highrises. Gaining the confidence of some of the most needy parents and children is another. There are cultural and other sensitivities that must be overcome. “Some of our families are putting all their energy into surviving,” said Deirdre. “Letting any agency into their lives is just too scary.”

One Foot Forward, Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan

Parents in the nine Meadow Lake First Nations communities in northwestern Saskatchewan are starting to hear about the new program that helps young children learn to talk. They are starting to ask when Rhonda Schultz is coming out to their community.

Just getting there is part of the challenge. The farthest community is three-and-a-half hours' drive north from Meadow Lake, which is about 200 miles north of Saskatoon. But Rhonda, the TLC³ speech-language pathologist, is used to taking her act on the road. And the community interest means that her efforts to promote the importance of early child development are paying off.

She has written pamphlets and slogans like, "This is one show you don't want to miss", complete with Admit One tickets (free!) to get your child started on her way to a bright future. More importantly, she has been working with parents with young children, in child care centres and in people's homes.

"I was visiting this one mother whose daughter had changed a lot. She had gone from barely talking at all to using two and three-word phrases. Her mom had changed her style of interacting with the child. She said to me: 'You know this parenting thing is hard work!'"

The TLC³ project is part of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council's Child Care Program. The Tribal Council is in the process of creating child care spaces in all nine communities. The Flying Dust First Nation has a child care centre, and there are two day homes in English River. Seven other communities will open child care facilities by the end of 1998, said Freida Iron, the program coordinator.

The TLC³ funding enabled the Child Care Program to hire Rhonda. She was already working for the Meadow Lake Tribal Council, but in a different capacity. After a year, some things are falling into place. For example, the toy library has been restocked with books and toys, filling a gap that Rhonda had identified for playing with infants.

The TLC³ language and cognitive development project is growing with the expansion of the child care program. "We are community-based and community-paced," said Freida. It is up to each community how they organize their child care, and whether or not they accept the TLC³ program. It does not sound as if acceptance will be a problem. "We are getting responses from communities like 'You will be more than welcome at our child care,'" said Rhonda.

But there are nine communities, and there is only one Freida, who is busy coordinating the child care expansion, and only one Rhonda to provide consultations, developmental screenings, home visits, programming support and parent workshops. They are trying to leverage all the resources they can. Rhonda has applied for a parent-child literacy program grant.

Other health and social service professionals in Meadow Lake are working together to provide services through the child care facilities. As Rhonda points out, far too many children have chronic ear infections which can interfere not only with their hearing, but with their learning to talk.

“A lot of our parents need a little extra support and reinforcement, which is what Rhonda can give them,” said Freida. “And the child care providers are like sponges for any new information or help she can provide.”

Regina Early Learning Centre, Saskatchewan

When a child is enrolled in the Regina Early Learning Centre, a photograph is taken of the child with his or her parents. The picture is put on the child's locker, on the front of the child's file, and in the child's binder. The binder documents the child's experiences at preschool in words and pictures. It helps to connect the worlds of home and school. Like a travel diary, it follows the child's voyage of discovery.

For more than 20 years, the Regina Early Learning Centre has offered a preschool program for children from low-income families. At least 80 per cent of the children are First Nations or Metis. The program provides a half-day program four days a week, with home visits on Fridays. Transportation is provided, and children attend from across the city. There are close to 100 three and four year-olds in the program, and a waiting list.

TLC³ funding has enabled the Early Learning Centre to enrich its program. "It is an enhancement, rather than an add-on," said Anne Luke, executive director (who is on sabbatical in 1998, but who has continued to be involved in a consulting role). In the first year of TLC³, the staff (most of whom, like the children, are Aboriginal) received training in the *High Scope* curriculum, developed for the Perry Preschool project in Michigan. A family literacy program (*PRINTS*) was introduced to encourage parents to tell and read stories to their children. A parent needs assessment was also developed.

Parent-staff events provided opportunities for parents to learn more about child development and the importance of their role. Anne said: "After these sessions, the speech-language consultant got a lot of calls from parents asking: 'What do you think about this at my child's age? Should I be concerned?'"

"The *High Scope* curriculum has given us an analytical framework for what we can do to support children's learning through play. We have increased our focus and expanded our knowledge. The struggle for us is explaining all this to others," said Anne. "After two or three months of implementing the plan-do-review strategy, we have seen children showing greater independence," said Judy Fry, the head teacher, who is filling in for Anne as director.

A major challenge for the teachers has been finding time and energy to absorb the new learning, do background reading, and get used to the computer (computers will be used for data collection). Future challenges include expanding the program, if possible, to include families with children younger than three, and finding effective ways to meet children's health needs. For example, there was a pilot tooth-brushing project.

At the end of one year, Anne said: "We are at the stumbling stage. But we are on track. We need to slow down and celebrate what we have done well."

“If you have a solid relationship, if there is trust, then people feel safe in airing issues and discussing them.”

Edythe Nerlich, Hincks, TLC³ project administrator

6 National Project Management: The Hincks

For the Hincks-Dellcrest Institute, key learning experiences in the first year involved coming to know and understand the community people and programs better, and adapting to a project that required them, as Nancy Cohen put it, “to act and think as you go” rather than having everything carefully planned in advance.

The project management role providing support, direction and funding to the community sites fell mainly to Edythe Nerlich, the project administrator, and Nancy Cohen, the director of evaluation.

TLC³ is not one single program that is being implemented in six places across Canada. There is a common purpose, but there is no grand design for the whole thing, which made it hard in the early going to see how it would fit together. How do you provide direction under those circumstances?

“Normally, when a grant of this dimension is given, you have worked up a very tidy proposal. This project is never going to be neat and tidy,” said Edythe. “We have learned to live with that, and a certain amount of ambiguity.” It has meant that the project has been able to benefit from what Edythe sees as serendipity.

Said Nancy. “These are competent people. That is why they were chosen. In my work on other projects, I try to hire people who are enthusiastic and competent. I assume they will work fairly independently, with consultation and collaboration. Our relationship with the sites has been like that.”

Instead of a command-and-control relationship, the emphasis has been on building mutual respect and trust between the Hincks and the community sites. The communities have mostly resolved their own problems, but Nancy and Edythe have been in the background, offering advice, suggesting alternatives, or just giving people the space to work it out. “You can’t have control over everything,” said Nancy.

While a lot has been accomplished by phone, there is no substitute for personal contact in building a strong relationship. During the first year of implementation, Nancy and Edythe conducted visits to The Learning Centres across the country, spent time with the program leaders and staff, and watched the programs in action.

“When Edythe and I did the site visits, we were holding our breath. We weren’t sure what to expect,” said Nancy. “We shouldn’t have been surprised, I guess, by how well and how quickly the sites developed their programs. After all, these people had come highly recommended. But in every case, we were impressed by the commitment and the energy and the collaborative relationships. We came home with a really good feeling.”

Every site not only has its own unique program; it also has its own culture and context. The programs are in inner-city neighbourhoods in large cities and in small towns in rural areas. The families are from different backgrounds and cultures, often speaking different languages.

Edythe said she and Nancy were most surprised by what they found in Meadow Lake because a small community in northwestern Saskatchewan was the most remote, geographically and culturally, from their experience.

“The people in Meadow Lake had a great time teasing us. When we asked where we would stay, Freida (coordinator of the child care program) said there would be some teepees at the side of the road. Of course, we got there and there was a nice hotel,” Edythe said. “I also thought the prairies were all flat. There are hills and forests and lakes around Meadow Lake. It is one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen.”

Before they left, Edythe and Nancy got a lot of advice from friends and colleagues on what to pack for a drive north in November. “When we showed them our candles and thermal blankets in Meadow Lake, they showed us what you really need in your trunk. If there had been a real problem on the road, we would have survived an extra ten minutes with our gear,” said Nancy.

The site visits represented an opportunity for the local program people to get to know Nancy and Edythe, to ask questions, and to receive some validation. It also represented a lot of work. “They put a lot into the preparation,” said Edythe. “They clearly wanted us to see them at their best. They also planned what they wanted to say to us and hear from us.”

The sites talked openly about their early hurdles. A program that gets off to a rocky start is not necessarily going to be weakened by it, said Edythe. “Some of the sites are much better, much stronger for the struggle. They have worked through some difficulties and come together. Those that got off to an easier start are more likely to run into some difficulties later.”

The one site that didn't get the same kind of formal visit over a couple of days was the Toronto site, which is a Hincks-sponsored project, located a few blocks away from the Institute offices. Growing Together is an anomaly in the Hincks-site relationship. "We tend to go over there for meetings," said Edythe.

It is kind of like taking on a job where you are supervising your brother-in-law. It is more difficult to differentiate the TLC³ component from the other things that Growing Together does. In turn, it is probably more difficult for Growing Together to identify with the national project. And the relationship with the Hincks is more routine and at the same time more involved. But every site had its own hurdles to overcome. And the TLC³ funding is plugging an important gap in Growing Together services. "It's a great site and a wonderful project," said Freda Martin. "They deserved to be chosen for TLC³. But it is a challenge for both them and us."

The inter-personal dialogue and understanding that was nurtured through the site visits was further developed at the second symposium in April 1998. The symposium helped to solidify relationships between Hincks and The Learning Centres. Edythe believes that the relationship needs to be strong because it will be tested. "In some ways, this project has consumed us. It has consumed the sites. This year, people have kept going on sheer adrenalin. The second year, the honeymoon will be over. Some issues will develop. We will have to work them out together."

There is obviously much more to project management than relationship-building. After the launch, there was considerable administrative work to be done. Sites were assisted in refining their proposals. Contracts for the sites were prepared. Each site drew up a budget, which had to be reviewed and approved.

The Hincks encouraged each site to find an academic advisor to act as a resource to the project. At present, five centres have an advisor from a university in their community.

Edythe also has responsibilities for communications. She puts out a newsletter four times a year. In advance of the second symposium, she circulated information on the sites to all of the sites. Hincks has contracted with a communications consultant to help develop and distribute appropriate materials and to assist in both short-term and long-term planning.

Hincks has overall responsibility for the evaluation, which is discussed in Section 8. Evaluation is Nancy's primary role. Project management also includes setting up the information system that will enable The Learning Centres to collect and maintain important data for the evaluation. A consultant, Simon Mielniczuk, of Web Networks, Toronto, was hired in the first year to implement an electronic information management system for TLC³. The system will be piloted in the fall of 1998.

Electronic mail will be used for interactive communications among the sites and with the Hincks. All the sites have been connected electronically to each other and to Hincks.

“We can do a lot of if we believe in something. I discovered there are many people working for the same cause. I didn’t know that. I am a citizen. It was a revelation.”

Lynne Flynn, St.-Rémi, Quebec

7 The Second Symposium: A Watershed

The second symposium, held in April 1998, represented a watershed for TLC³. Put simply, TLC³ started to feel like a national project, with shared values and a common cause. That feeling comes across not only in comments from the six centres across Canada, but also from members of the National Advisory Committee, who felt they became more of a contributing part of TLC³.

The symposium was held in the same location as the first one, at the Eaton Hall Inn and Conference Centre in King City, north of Toronto. There were at least two and usually three representatives from each site. As we noted earlier, a National Advisory Committee was formed as an outcome of the first symposium. It met once in the fall of 1997 and again immediately before this symposium. Most members of the advisory committee attended the whole or part of the symposium.

The symposium objectives focused on: strengthening understanding of each site, its challenges and achievements; creating a stronger sense of a TLC³ community; increasing the likelihood that programs would routinely share information and expertise; increasing understanding and ability to shape and use the emerging framework and work plan of the evaluation system; informing people and creating greater comfort around the information management system for data collection; and generating ideas for a communications strategy.

Based on feedback from the participants, the symposium met and even exceeded its goals in many ways.

The site representatives made short presentations explaining their program elements, their progress to date, and some of the challenges they had faced or were still facing. (Much of that information is included in the site profiles in Section 5.) The sites had all sent in a little report on their programs and progress ahead of time, and it had been distributed. But it was not the same as listening to participants provide their own real-life commentary.

From the discussions, it became clear there was a real hunger for information – among sites and the advisory committee – about the diverse approaches and communities involved in TLC³.

TLC³ site participants wanted to know what was happening across the country. They wanted to know they weren't alone in what they were experiencing. And they wanted validation of what they were doing. Time after time, in conversations and group discussions, they said things like: "I think I can put away the sense of urgency. I think we are doing fine." (Sue Formosa, Vancouver) or "I think we are okay, we are on target." (Lisa Davies, Dartmouth)

The symposium also gave a sense of a national picture that had not been there before. "What we are doing fits with the larger whole," said Michelle Droettboom, Vancouver. Several site participants also mentioned appreciating the luxury of having time – two whole days – to think and talk with colleagues about their programs and where they were headed next.

There was a sense of external validation of internal struggles. "It is interesting to have an outsider see our program, and give feedback. I think it is important," said Lynne Flynn, a parent volunteer from St.-Rémi. "It's helpful to have someone from outside. We need the validation," said Deirdre McKibbon, from Growing Together in Toronto.

The "outsider" in this case was a member of the National Advisory Committee. A member of the committee worked with each site during the site workshop sessions. This was very much a working symposium, and members of the advisory committee rolled up their sleeves to work with the sites they had volunteered to advise and mentor.

A significant portion of time during the symposium was devoted to the evaluation process for TLC³. Ray DeV Peters from Queen's University, a member of the advisory committee, made a presentation on evaluation, and Nancy Cohen, the director of evaluation for TLC³, explained the collaborative nature of the evaluation and the purpose the workbook, which was prepared by Nancy's evaluation staff at the Hincks. (There is more on evaluation in Section 8.)

The workbook process required participants to focus on specific outcomes for children, parents and communities, to identify what activities in their programs would achieve these outcomes, and what signposts would signal that achievement. There were two separate working sessions on the workbook over the course of the symposium, which ran from a Thursday afternoon through to lunchtime on Saturday.

The work on evaluation seemed to be time well spent. Several site participants mentioned how concerned they had been over what the evaluation would entail, how much time it would take, and when it would begin. Getting started on the workbook, receiving support and advice from an advisory committee member, and hearing from Nancy that the evaluation would not start until mid-1999 put at least some anxieties to rest.

Another small group session had each site working on communications strategies and reporting back to the whole group on their ideas about audiences, objectives, messages and vehicles for communicating. Again, the symposium revealed a hunger for more information. The sites asked for more communications materials that described TLC³ and that emphasized, in simple language, the knowledge about early child development that is the foundation of the project.

Consultant Simon Mielniczuk gave a presentation on the electronic information management system he is putting in place for each site to use for data collection and retrieval.

A highlight of the symposium was the Open University session. It was originally planned that participants would break up into two or three separate groups to hear about and discuss different topics. But after some debate, the group as a whole decided to stay together. The topic was one that had originally been raised during a question period by Anne McKeough, an advisory committee member from the University of Calgary. She asked if site participants, who were talking about the steps in early language development, could explain the steps in cognitive development as well.

(At the advisory committee meeting held just before the symposium began, Anne had raised the issue of cognition. She thought the programs were probably encouraging cognitive development in their activities, but there didn't seem to be the same focus on it as language. Others agreed. When the issue came up with the whole group, it was welcomed as an opportunity to expand everyone's knowledge and gain some more common ground.)

Cognition was an area that people wanted to learn more about. Anne McKeough and Sharon Griffin, an advisory committee member from Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, were called upon to share some of their knowledge with the group. It was an interactive session, with lots of participation from the floor.

Another advisory committee member from the University of Western Ontario, Geneese Warr-Leeper, contributed the “Tree of Knowledge”, as a way of graphically showing how children make connections within and between experiences, leading to concept development. (For those who are interested, the Symposium Proceedings include more information.)

Part of the solidarity-building that occurred at the symposium happened outside the formal sessions during meal times and evenings when people from across the country could get to know each other. Many had never met before. Not all the participants had been at the first symposium. The sites were at such a tentative stage in April 1997 that some people were not even involved yet. Some advisory committee members were brought on board later as well.

At the end of the symposium, Michelle from Vancouver said: “Now we are collaborators; before, we were just networks.” It seemed to be a feeling that was widely shared. Dana Brynelsen, from Vancouver, added: “We have learned there are people right across this country who believe as we do.”

For Freida Iron, from Meadow Lake, the symposium helped make connections. When she first considered the task of opening day care facilities in nine communities and implementing TLC³ at the same time, “I thought it’s too much. I can’t. But now I see that it’s all interconnected. It all fits. And it’s great.” From the Dartmouth project, Natalie Downey said: “Right now, what excites me is that I see the full magnitude of the difference we can make in the long haul – the overall potential.”

The advisory committee came into its own at this symposium. Members of the committee got involved in working with the program people and helping to move the project forward into Year 2. The advisory committee members met briefly after the symposium ended to “debrief”. The symposium was a learning experience for them too.

Mandy Kay-Raining Bird, who is advisor to the Dartmouth project and a member of the advisory committee, said she learned about the other sites, but she also learned more about her own local project. “I was on the working committee who hired Natalie (the TLC³ coordinator). We thought now we can relax and she can implement. I learned through the symposium that we need to be more involved and supportive than we have been. I also learned what an advantage we have in our close contacts with policy-makers in the provincial government. I am starting to learn about how to influence policy.”

Gérard Malcuit, a member of the St.-Rémi team and a member of the advisory committee, said he appreciated the opportunity to work with the B.C. team on the evaluation workbook (“a wonderful pedagogical tool”). “I discovered I could help,” he said. “The people from B.C. and St.-Rémi did appreciate that kind of exercise. It helped that ideas became clearer.”

Sharon Griffin (who worked with St.-Rémi) said she learned that for some of the sites, a major challenge is to “create a climate” in which parents are encouraged to interact with their young children.

Joan Francolini, from The Lawson Foundation, who sits on the advisory committee, summed up what many people were saying: “The leap that has been made between last year and this year is significant. I am so pleased with the interface between this committee and the sites.”

“It was to be expected, but not taken for granted,” said Freda Martin.

“Our view is that evaluation must be a collaborative venture.”
Nancy Cohen, Director of Evaluation for TLC³

8 The Evaluation Framework

Evaluation is an essential part of this initiative, and one of the most difficult for both project administrators and the sites.

The original plan was for a core evaluation team, led by Nancy Cohen, director of TLC³ evaluation, to design an evaluation in collaboration with the community sites, and to develop a protocol that would be identical for all sites across the country. That proved to be unrealistic, given the diversity of programs and communities. The programs are aimed at different ages from 0 to 5; they operate in very different contexts; they offer different curriculum and use different practices. Diversity is one of the project’s strengths; it is also one of its complications.

Relatively early on in the first year, the plan was revised to include both a site-specific and a cross-site evaluation. The core evaluation team is responsible for the national or cross-site evaluation, and for coordination of the site-specific work. The revised plan puts more of a burden on the local sites. “It’s another load of work for them,” said Nancy. But it also gives them an opportunity to build ownership in the community for the evaluation process, gather information that will contribute to the credibility of their program, and (hopefully) enable them to leverage funding after the five years of TLC³ are over.

Community involvement and acceptance will be key to the success of the evaluation, according to Ray DeV Peters, who is from Queen’s University and who is also a member of the TLC³ National Advisory Committee. Ray talked about evaluation at the second symposium. It is important, he said, to explain why the information is being collected. “Parents often welcome providing information if it is relevant to the reason they are there in the first place,” said Ray, who is working with a team of researchers at community sites in the *Better Beginnings, Better Futures* project in Ontario.

Rhonda Schultz provided a good real-life example from Meadow Lake. “If you ask parents about children’s ear infections, they may not understand. If you tell them, it’s not normal for children’s ears to be running all the time, and explain to them why it’s not normal, they get it. They want their children to be well.”

Ray said that communities need to have input into the process, the attitude of researchers must be respectful of the community's realities and experience, and results must be shared with the community in an understandable form. "The classic example of why communities resist research is a van of university students arrives in a community, they collect some information, a professor turns it into polysyllables for a journal, and the community never hears anything until the next van arrives."

The TLC³ evaluation process is being designed to be "community-friendly," said Nancy. She said that people working with communities understand the need to do evaluation, but it does not tend to be their priority. "Given a choice, for example, they would put any extra money into programming. That is why we created a separate budget line for each site for evaluation. It's not a lot, \$20,000 a year per site, but it is reserved for that purpose."

The TLC³ evaluation will not start formally until the third year of the project, which is mid-1999. Waiting until Year 3 is wise, according to Carol Crill Russell, who is with the Invest in Kids Foundation and a member of the TLC³ advisory committee. She said her experience with *Better Beginnings* taught her that: "The evaluation should not begin until the models are what we called 'proud'." Then, she said, the main thing is to keep your focus on: "Are the kids better off because of this?"

Nancy cautioned that: "We need to clarify the realities around what the evaluation can be. This is not a research project. Most of our funding is going into programming."

At this point, it is not clear whether it will be possible for any of the sites to have a "control" group to compare how the children in the program fared compared to children in similar circumstances whose families did not participate in TLC³. It is also not clear how much data can be assembled that can be compared to national norms. Nancy has met with people in charge of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth. Some of the questions that will be asked of parents in TLC³ will be the same as those used by the national study. The national study group is also planning a new survey targeting children in the 0 - 5 age range and it may be possible for the TLC³ evaluation to use some of the same measures.

There is much planning and preparation to be done in Year 2. Jane Hoffmeyer joined the Hincks team early in 1998 as evaluation coordinator; she will move planning forward and maintain consistent contact with the sites. Mirella Pugliese, the research assistant, is preparing materials and doing literature searches.

The TLC³ evaluation process took a major step forward with the work that was done at the second symposium. “I was really pleased at how helpful people found the Evaluation Workbook,” said Nancy. “Many of the sites had started out either with very general objectives or a very long list of objectives. The workbook seemed to help them clarify and refine what outcomes they were seeking and what they were doing that would achieve those specific results.” After the symposium the sites were asked to complete the workbook back in their communities and send it to the core evaluation team at Hincks.

Nancy said that when the evaluation is completed: “We will be able to put together themes about a national project. We will have some data, and we will have a series of stories about these unique sites.”

The evaluation will answer five general questions:

1. Are the activities of site-specific TLC³ programs effective in enhancing language and cognitive development and social competence?
2. At the end of the project, do the site professionals and parents feel that they have some practical tools that can be applied to enhance children’s language and cognitive development?
3. Can the sites show their understanding of the importance of evaluating what they do as a way of getting the attention and support of policy and decision-makers by undertaking some evaluation activities or continuing to collaborate with local researchers?
4. Are children who participated in TLC³ more prepared for school entry than children who did not participate?
5. Are the public, government, and professionals more informed about the importance of early language and development, the wide-ranging implications of inadequate development in these areas, and the range of interventions that can help children be better prepared for school entry?

In summing up the view from the end of Year 1, Nancy had this to say: “This is a complex and ambitious project that presents both tremendous possibilities and tremendous challenges. Many of the possibilities and challenges stem from the same sources, the diversity of models and populations, the

complications of embedding a program into an already complex organization and community context, and the difficulties of evaluating the outcomes of such a multi-faceted process. Some issues may be more difficult to address than others, and there will be limits on what we can conclude at the end of the process. But I am convinced that we have much to learn, that at the end of the project we will have much to say, and that we will be benefitting the lives of young children and their families on the way.”³

³ Excerpted from a speech to the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Ottawa, May, 1998.

“All families need support in parenting their kids.”

Sue Formosa, CONNECTIONS, Vancouver

9 Some Tentative Conclusions

We hesitate to call the following “key learnings” because a) they are only tentative, based on a year of site development, and b) they are often like the proverbial double-edged sword; they cut both ways, making it difficult to conclude anything one way or the other.

As noted at the beginning, these tentative conclusions have not been endorsed by the TLC³ team. They are distilled from many different comments by many of the participants at the second symposium. They may or may not have application to other projects. They are not presented in any particular order.

- As either luck or good judgment would have it, TLC³ is extremely timely.

Because of the efforts of many concerned individuals and organizations, early child development has made it on to the public agenda. There is growing interest in the importance and potential of the early years. That means there will be a ready “market” for whatever findings this national project will have to offer in terms of the effectiveness of early grassroots community interventions.

- The freedom to take risks has allowed TLC³ to ‘take off’ at the grassroots level.

The local program people have been given the opportunity and the flexibility to develop a unique program to improve children’s early language and cognitive development in their communities. That freedom (and the funding that came with it) has unleashed a burst of energy and creativity.

At the same time, moving forward without all the usual formal systems, processes and approvals in place created some uncertainty and anxiety. The community program-developers clearly felt under pressure to seize the moment – to get a quality program off the ground in record time. There was a lot of concern among the sites about whether or not they were “on track”. It was not until after a year of implementation, at the second symposium when everyone got together to compare notes, that people seemed prepared to give themselves the benefit of the doubt.

- Parents respond to opportunities for their children.

A lot of the parents who are coming out to TLC³ programs are not aware of the latest scientific findings about the impact of early childhood experience on brain development and coping skills. They just know somebody is offering a program that is supposed to help their kids. If parents are given a good, clear explanation of why it's important, and some concrete things to do with their infant or toddler, they will take it from there.

- Building community trust takes time, patience and respect.

This is certainly not a “new” learning, but it is one that is worth repeating. Community buy-in or ownership is essential and cannot be taken for granted. Particularly when the intervention involves outsiders coming into a community to offer a program, community understanding and acceptance must be earned. At some sites, it was the community who needed time and encouragement to feel ownership, at others it was the service providers who had to “appropriate” the program. In some cases, both were a challenge. Encouraging the appropriation process was a vital part of site development.

- Every site has experienced a “positive problem” of high demand.

The more successful the programs, the more the programs are promoted in the community, the more this problem will grow. We must be realistic about what is do-able to avoid staff burn-out and the frustration of creating more waiting lists.

At the same time, there are concerns at some sites that the most marginalized families – who need the programs the most – are not being reached. That issue is still to be resolved.

- Embedding a new program within an existing one has both advantages and disadvantages.

An advantage is that the people running the program already have credibility and experience in the community. It is doubtful that TLC³ could have gotten off the ground as quickly as it did if the programs had to start from scratch.

A disadvantage is that it may be difficult to measure the impact of some of the programs if they are enhancements of an existing program. (Did the enhancement make a difference? We probably won't be able to compare before and after.) This approach may also confuse communications if the public or the community cannot

distinguish TLC³ from the program in which it is embedded.

- Capturing commonality across diverse sites will be a struggle.

The diversity of the sites is a strength and a complication of TLC³. It is important that some common findings come out of this national project. But the findings will not be based on a common intervention. The communities are different, the programs are different, the ages of the children are different. It is important to be realistic about what the cross-site evaluation will be able to demonstrate.

At the same time, each site should have some important things to say after five years about the difference the programming has made for families and children in the community.

- The sites share some common features, including cultural sensitivity, parent empowerment, and community involvement.

These things are achieved in different ways, but they are common to all sites. Hiring Tamil-speakers for the program is one way that Growing Together has demonstrated cultural sensitivity. In B.C., the program has adapted to parents who play and talk and sing with their babies in their mother tongue (that is not English). All the programs work with parents to give them information to help them help their own children.

- Distance is an obstacle to internal project communications.

It may be too obvious to mention, but the distance between sites and between the sites and the TLC³ project administrators makes communications difficult. Despite all the advances in e-mail, fax and teleconferencing, there is no substitute for personal contact. The site visits conducted by Hincks staff helped. But it was not until the second symposium that the sites could develop personal contacts with each other. Given the expense of bringing people together from across the country, there is no apparent solution.

- Relationships matter.

Relationships – between the funder and the program administrators, between the administrators and the sites, between and among the people delivering the programs – are the glue that holds this project together. Trust is hard-earned and must be continually renewed, but it is an essential ingredient in a project that lasts five years and bridges a continent.

- Spinoffs are a way to maximize the investment.

One of expectations of this project is that it will have spinoff effects. There are already signs that this expectation is being fulfilled. At some sites, the spinoff effects are planned. In B.C., for example, 78 professionals were trained in the Mother Goose program in the first year.

In other cases, a spinoff came from what appeared to be a problem. For example, one of the teachers at the Regina Early Learning Centre left for another job. But she has taken what she learned with her, and she is being invited back to explain how she has used that learning in her new role.

- Everything takes longer and is harder than you expect.

This point seems to contradict the earlier one that talked about how quickly the site development occurred and programs were implemented. The site development occurred quickly in retrospect – not compared to what the program-developers aspired to in their original proposals. Most of those proposals were overly ambitious in terms of what could be achieved in the first year.

It has been an important part of the flexibility of the project to allow the sites to scale back their proposals, if necessary, and modify their time lines. For example, staff training has taken longer than planned at some sites. In Dartmouth, hiring a speech-language pathologist and TLC³ coordinator didn't happen until three months before the second symposium. In Quebec, getting the community on-side took longer than expected, and then there was the ice storm, which no one could have anticipated but which set the project back by about two months.

- The divide between the sectors of research and policy-making and community program delivery is bridgeable, but it seems to depend mostly on the personalities involved.

A relationship is being built between members of the National Advisory Committee and the community site teams. Working together in person at the second symposium helped.

At the local level, the relationship between the sites and their academic advisor is dependent on the researcher being sensitive to the challenges of community-based programming. The Hincks administrators took pains to make it clear that TLC³ wanted researchers to act as advisors and resource people, not to turn TLC³ into a research project under their direction.

- A focus on cognitive development should be deliberate.

There was a real effort made at the second symposium to encourage a more focused approach to cognitive development. Language development was clearly being addressed in all the programs, but cognition strategies were not so apparent. The national advisors said that cognitive development should not be left as an implicit program element. It should be explicit and planned. That is going to take some more work.

- Everyone needs validation and support.

Even the most experienced, professional service-providers need to know they are on track and doing well. They need support and sometimes guidance. And if they are part of a national project, they need to feel part of a national team. Creating stronger links across the country is going to be a challenge.

- We must appreciate small steps. Many small steps added together may well have major long-term effects.

This piece of advice applies to the children and to the projects.

- Learning for Foundations:

- a) patience
- b) choose good people
- c) don't try to control too much, but keep aware of our basic principles
- d) communication - with the project and with the board
- e) be supportive
- f) rely on good outside (neutral) advisors