

The Learning Curve:

TLC³ After Five Years

(1997-2002)

Table of Contents

Part I: Introduction to TLC³	2
Early Development of TLC ³	2
National Project Management	5
The Evaluation	6
Part 2: Sustainability: The Site Experiences	7
TLC ³ in Vancouver	7
TLC ³ in Calgary	11
TLC ³ in Regina	14
TLC ³ in Meadow Lake	17
TLC ³ in Toronto	20
TLC ³ in Saint- Rémi	24
TLC ³ in Dartmouth	26
Part 3: The Legacy of the Learning Communities	30
Next Steps: Learning and Sharing	31

Part I: Introduction to TLC³

What is TLC³? This may seem like a strange question to be asking about something that began five years ago and is now reaching a conclusion. But TLC³ has not been an ordinary project. You can really only tell what TLC³ is by looking up close, and stepping back to view the whole panorama, and zooming in again. You have to keep changing focus.

If you look at it only from a distance, there is just an outline, without much colour or depth. But if your lens is focused too narrowly, you see just a fragment of the picture. Each piece has a rich and intriguing design of its own making, but there are also patterns across and between, if you can get the perspective right.

Putting it all in perspective is the challenge now as this initiative completes five years of program delivery for young children and families (1997-2002) at seven sites across Canada, and launches into a period of analysis of what has been achieved and what has been learned.

As this report is being written, in the fall of 2002, TLC³ is at a turning point. The funding period for community programs has been completed. The community projects are at maturity, and have faced the issue that faces every community organization that receives time-limited funding – how can we sustain this?

The Learning Curve: TLC³ After Five Years uses the theme of sustainability to explore the different ways in which this project has had lasting impacts on families, organizations, communities and project participants. It does not report on the evaluation results because they were not yet available.

First, we focus on the big picture – how TLC³ began, what it was designed to achieve, how it was organized, and who was involved. Then we zero in on the sites to describe very briefly what the community organizations have managed to “grow” over the last five years. In the last section, we pull back again to see what patterns may be emerging across and between.

Early Development of TLC³

TLC³ stands for Thinking, Listening and Communicating, Tender Loving Care, and The Learning Centres. In French, it stands for Tendresse, Lien et Communication, Tandem: Langage et Communication, and Théorie en Liaison avec la Communauté. TLC³ is a cross-Canada initiative with seven local community-based projects aimed at enhancing language and cognitive (thinking or reasoning) development among young children, aged 0 to 5 years.

The Lawson Foundation, a family foundation based in London, Ontario, provided the funding, and the Hincks-Dellcrest Institute – now named the Gail Appel Institute¹ – based in Toronto, provided national leadership, management and support to the local projects.

TLC³ grew out of a personal concern for children and their parents. Family members on the Board of the Lawson Foundation shared an interest in early childhood development. They wanted to fund a major, multi-year project that would reflect their priority. It would also reflect the Foundation's interest in becoming more proactive and strategic in its granting, rather than simply receiving requests for financial support from others.

The Lawson Foundation's President, Connie Gardiner, knew Dr. Freda Martin and had heard of some of the work that the Hincks (now Hincks-Dellcrest) Centre had done with parents and children. Freda was Director of the children's mental health centre, and its affiliated Institute, which is a registered charitable organization. The Foundation asked the Institute to develop and manage its project. Freda formed a small TLC³ project management team which went to work on the concept.

It was decided that the mission of TLC³ would be to enhance early language and cognitive development. That mission would be accomplished not by distributing a program developed centrally, but by calling on the creativity and energy of community-based organizations. The goals of TLC³ can be summed up as follows:

- to enhance language and cognitive development among children from birth to five years and to demonstrate useful and effective strategies for their parents and for professionals;
- to support and strengthen the capacity of families, organizations and communities to enhance early language and learning;
- to learn more about how to build and sustain organizational and community capacity over the longer term;
- to create collaborative links between interested partners, including programs, academics, educators, policy-makers, parents and other community members;
- to share information and learning with communities, governments, professional groups and the general public; and
- to evaluate the effects of programs and approaches and develop an awareness among community-based project participants of the usefulness of evaluation in their local organizations.

¹ The Institute has actually had three names since TLC³ started. First, it was the Hincks Institute and became Hincks-Dellcrest after an amalgamation of two children's mental health centres. In 2002, it became the Gail Appel Institute. It remains part of the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre.

The implementation plan involved finding people and organizations at the community level who would have the experience and creativity to make the most of this opportunity. The community sites were selected on the basis that:

- The organization and the people involved had a track record of establishing and operating community-based programs.
- In general, they had demonstrated the ability to work with others in their communities and were well placed to act as resource centres for the sharing of learning;
- As a group, the sites operated in diverse contexts (urban/rural, low/moderate income, at risk/healthy populations, and including a Francophone community site and an Aboriginal community site) and served different age groups (infancy, toddlers, preschoolers).

The Foundation committed \$5 million over five years. The Foundation asked that TLC³ not focus solely on economically disadvantaged families, on the basis that all parents can use some help with parenting their children in the early years. It also suggested that the project management team leave the option of adding another site once the project was successfully underway, if there was sufficient funding. The additional site could be used to fill in potential gaps in knowledge. Six sites were selected in the beginning, and a seventh was added two years later in 1999.

In all seven cases, the project sites were identified and offered the opportunity to participate, based on recommendations from people involved in early childhood development policy or research in the various provinces. At nearly all the sites, TLC³ was embedded in an existing community-based organization. Where it was not, a community organization was involved as a partner.

Community-based sites were selected in Vancouver, British Columbia, Calgary, Alberta, Regina and Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, Toronto, Ontario, Saint-Rémi, Quebec, and Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

A national advisory group, drawn from universities, governments and non-profit organizations, was assembled in the early development phase of TLC³. Its members are involved in education, research, policy, public affairs and advocacy on behalf of children. They provided advice and support to the national project management team. Some became actively involved with the local site advisory group in their province. They also met once a year with all the sites at the TLC³ national symposium.

Each local organization, once selected, was challenged to develop the best way to serve the parents and children in its community. The national project management team encouraged the local sites to pursue the TLC³ goals in ways that suited community needs. They were asked to justify their approach based on current

research and best practice. They were allowed to use off-the-shelf packaged programs, adapt or enhance an existing program or develop a new one.

Funding for programming was committed for five years up-front at \$80,000 per site per year – enough to enable local organizations to make a real difference in what they could offer young children and parents. Designated funding of \$20,000 per year per site was also provided for an evaluation.

There was no handbook on how to “do” a TLC³ program. There was no program template to follow. There was no funding formula to apply. TLC³ was not a box you had to fit into. It was more like the dough that kids play with. Each site had good stuff – money, time and talent – to work with, and they were expected to make something of it.

National Project Management

The national project management team in Toronto provided central administration of TLC³, including monitoring of the sites. The local projects had to provide annual reports and budgets and regular financial statements.

The project management team offered support and advice, and emphasized that they were available if the sites needed help resolving issues. Within the terms of reference outlined by the TLC³ goals, communities had the autonomy and flexibility to solve their own problems – and were encouraged to do so.

The team organized a three-day national TLC³ symposium every year, attended by representatives from all the local projects, the national advisors, and the Lawson Foundation. These events provided opportunities to share experiences from across the country and learn from each other. There was always a well-known speaker to stimulate everyone’s thinking. The symposium often broke into smaller, working groups to tackle a particular issue or task. An external facilitator managed the agenda, and discussions were open and respectful of different experiences and points of view. These events were good for morale, and helped create a common vision and a shared TLC³ identity.

The project management team coordinated and guided the evaluation. Nancy Cohen, TLC³ Director of Evaluation, had dual responsibilities – for overall program monitoring and support and for the site evaluations. She travelled across the country to meet with the project teams and see what they were doing, ask and answer questions, and generally get a feel for the communities and their organizations. The sites could demonstrate their programs and introduce their local staff and advisors on their own turf. In the first year, Edythe Nerlich, TLC³ project manager, made the trips with Nancy, and afterwards, Nancy was accompanied by the TLC³ evaluation coordinator, who currently is Laura Heinz.

The Evaluation

When TLC³ started, the original plan was to do a national cross-site evaluation, with a common protocol, developed in consultation with the local sites. It says something about the flexibility of this initiative that the plan changed. The approach to the evaluation changed because the sites were so different. They were not delivering a common program or curriculum. They were serving different age groups in very different communities. To impose a strict cross-site research protocol on this initiative would have demanded sacrificing the diversity and community creativity that were so important to TLC³.

“I will admit to lying awake some nights worrying about how this would all work out,” says Nancy Cohen. “It is not as tight as researchers are used to. It’s different. It’s messier, but it makes perfect sense. It is consistent with the philosophy of TLC³ which recognizes the capacity of communities and gives them ownership.”

Each site has designed and implemented its own evaluation, usually in partnership with a university-based researcher or a consultant, and with Nancy’s advice and encouragement. In their roster of evaluation tools, the sites have used structured observation, testing, feedback forms, questionnaires and interviews. At the end of 2002, the sites were analysing their findings and putting them in the context of the families they served, the organizations in which TLC³ was embedded, the programs offered, the partners involved, and the wider community that was affected.

The national project management team will review the site evaluations, and together with all the sites and the national advisors, will begin to identify common themes and learning. It will be a shared learning process. An important part of the final product will be case studies from sites, illustrating key processes and outcomes.

In addition to the data gathered during the program phase of TLC³, support from the Networks of Centres of Excellence (Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network) funded by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council will permit TLC³ sites to follow some children as they make a transition into the academic grades in school.

“You get a real sense of the power and value of community mobilization from TLC³. At each of the sites, people with different interests and backgrounds got involved, and pursued different paths to a common goal.”

Bob Glossop, National TLC³ Advisor
Executive Director, Programs and Research
The Vanier Institute of the Family

Part 2: Sustainability: The Site Experiences

The local TLC³ sites were challenged to think about sustainability around the mid-point of the TLC³ initiative when they had programs up-and-running and things were relatively stable. As Vancouver’s Sue Formosa recalls, Connie Gardiner of the Lawson Foundation, stood up at the annual symposium and asked what is sustainability? “We really started to think about it,” said Sue. “What was it that we wanted to keep going?”

The sections that follow include brief descriptions of each of the sites and what they were able to sustain and how. The best way to understand what the community-based projects did is to hear them talk about it. They reflect how the “learning centres” absorbed and shared knowledge and experience, embedded new principles and approaches, and built organizational and community capacity to sustain TLC³.

TLC³ in Vancouver

The legacy of TLC³ in British Columbia goes far beyond the two East Vancouver neighbourhoods where the Connections project engaged parents and their infants and toddlers.

Because of TLC³, there are over one thousand leaders in British Columbia trained in the Parent-Child Mother Goose program. They are librarians, early childhood educators, infant development consultants, speech-language pathologists, teachers, public health nurses, community workers, other professionals, and parents. More than 100 Parent-Child Mother Goose programs have been started in B.C. communities, and the philosophy of the program, which uses stories, rhymes and lullabies to develop language and strengthen the parent-child relationship, has been broadly communicated through training.

It is not TLC³ that is well known in early childhood circles in B.C. “Most people don’t even know the name of our local project, Connections,” says coordinator Sue Formosa. “But so many people have made the connection to the Parent-Child Mother Goose program, and are using the philosophy in the work they do. It is a

mindset as much as a program. It is about involving families based on wellness, building on pleasure in the parent-child relationship, rather than focusing on problems and deficits.”

Connections put considerable energy over the five years of TLC³ into building bridges to other organizations. The original Connections partnership was between a mental health agency (Alan Cashmore Centre) and the Infant Development Programmes of BC. They formed a partnership with two Neighbourhood Houses in Vancouver, Kiwassa and Collingwood, to provide Parent-Child Mother Goose programs and developmental screening.

From that original partnership, a Parent-Child Mother Goose program network was created and nurtured across B.C. “The Parent-Child Mother Goose program is absolutely embedded in the hearts and minds of quite a large number of people all across the province, people from a broad spectrum of disciplines and experience, working with parents and children,” says Beth Hutchinson, who is part of Connections and the Vancouver Infant Development Programme.

As the Connections project was preparing to phase itself out, there were two challenges – how to maintain the programs for families that Connections had developed in Vancouver and how to maintain the quality and support network for the Parent-Child Mother Goose program across the province.

Connections ran Parent-Child Mother Goose programs for parents and their infants and toddlers in the Neighbourhood Houses, both located in mixed-income areas on Vancouver’s east side. In addition to the Parent-Child Mother Goose program, individual language and developmental screening, monitoring and follow-up were provided to families through First Look at Talking, Further Looking at Talking and Keeping in Touch.

Connections approached the sustainability issue in the same way it approached everything – through creative partnerships and perseverance. “It was helpful that the idea of sustainability was introduced early by TLC³,” says Sue. “It was not left to the bitter end.”

Some two years before TLC³ was to end, a committee was formed to look to the future. It was made up of three parent representatives and 11 agencies. The committee designed a framework for sustaining a high-quality program for families. The National Office of the Parent-Child Mother Goose program and the Provincial Advisor for the Infant Development Programmes of B.C., acted as advisors. The Provincial Advisor, Dana Brynelsen, also chaired the Connections Advisory Committee.

The major components of the framework were coordination of Parent-Child Mother Goose programs in B.C. and continuation of the programs at Kiwassa and Collingwood as mentoring sites. A sponsoring organization was needed to move forward, and the B.C. Council for Families agreed to take on the role. “We couldn’t have ended up with a better arrangement,” says Sue. “The Council has a long track record, and manages a number of family programs. It receives some government funding and also does its own fund-raising as a registered non-profit organization. It is very highly regarded in the province.”

Funding has been secured to continue the Parent-Child Mother Goose programs for parents and infants at the Kiwassa and Collingwood Neighbourhood Houses, and parent volunteers will likely run programs for toddlers. That is how the toddler program got started in the first place – parents whose babies had graduated from the infant program after age two decided to keep getting together to sing and talk and tell stories. It is hoped that the toddler programs will be funded in future years.

The transition at the Neighbourhood Houses has been smooth for families. “I think people feel very cared for, and they know that the Parent-Child Mother Goose programs will continue,” Sue says. “Kiwassa and Collingwood Neighbourhood Houses feel ownership of the programs. The structure for overseeing and supporting the programs will be different. I think there will be more coordination with other early childhood services for parents and children.”

Sustaining the language and developmental screening that Connections provided has been more difficult. Sue is hoping that enduring links will be forged between all the Parent-Child Mother Goose programs in B.C. and speech-language and audiology services for children. “It will be slower to grow, but I think it will develop. Right now, everything is in flux because of major changes in government funding and the reorganization of regional health authorities.”

The degree of impact of Connections on families depended on their needs and circumstances. “There were some parents who were experiencing serious stresses at home, like domestic violence, whose isolation was finally broken by this experience. For them, the impact was very potent,” says Sue.

Parents who participated in the individual screening sessions for their babies reported that they gained better understanding of their children’s communication development. Those whose children were referred to speech language services and other resources (for autism, for example) appreciated getting help in infancy. “Identifying them before the age of three meant they would get a good early start on intervention.”

Parents in general appreciated the group support from both the leaders and the other parents. “They became more confident as parents,” says Sue. “There were

lots of parents who were already competent and confident and just had a whale of a time with their kids, but there were some who really needed the support.”

Many families shared a new sense of community. “It was especially clear in one of the toddler groups, where the children had been through the infant program together. The parents were like extended family, and the children moved among all the adults to chat and cuddle.”

A few parents said they did not want their children to grow up to be as shy as they were. These parents tended to avoid drop-ins or other family places because of their shyness. “They felt their children gained a lot from coming to the program. This was a very powerful social experience. I would like to see these kids in a longer-term follow-up. If we can help kids at this early stage with their capacity to face the world, that is a lifetime impact,” Sue says.

Dana Brynelsen says there is no question that B.C. is in “a far better place than we were five years ago” because of TLC³. “Intervening in infancy does make a difference. There’s not a parent of a young child who would not benefit from this program, and children who are at risk of delay in development and their families benefit all the more.”

“As a society we have not supported families with young children very much at all. And yet we know that providing support when children are very small can have lifelong beneficial consequences for the child, for the family and for the broader community,” says Dana, who is also a national advisor for TLC³.

The impact of TLC³ on Sue Formosa personally has been huge. A speech-language pathologist for many years, she is training to be an archeological technician. “TLC³ was the biggest challenge and the biggest satisfaction in my professional life. I wanted to run away lots of times. It seemed overwhelming. But now there is a real sense of accomplishment. I learned I can do many things and I can learn what I don’t know. It gave me the confidence to make a complete career change.”

She credits the management style of Hincks-Dellcrest for some of this self-discovery and for setting a tone for TLC³. “They were very respectful. We said: ‘What do you want us to do?’ and they said to us: ‘What do you think will work for you?’ Their approach gave us confidence. And then we turned around and did the same for the families. We truly turned the program over to the parents. We saw our role as guiding them to discovery of their relationship with their child. It worked wonderfully.”

“The Parent-Child Mother Goose program is one of the best community-based approaches to supporting family and child development that we have available. We are so grateful to have had this opportunity to develop this service throughout our province. I’m not sure we will ever grasp the true magnitude of the change from this initiative.”

Dana Brynelsen, National TLC³ Advisor
Provincial Advisor for the Infant Development Programmes of B.C. Chair of the Vancouver TLC³ Advisory Committee

TLC³ in Calgary

TLC³ was handed to Maria Valenti on her first day on the job as the new Executive Director of the University of Calgary Child Care Centre in 1999. It was like a door opening, with TLC³ as the key. “It was incredible timing. It allowed us to introduce some fresh ideas and develop new resources. Because of TLC³, we found ourselves partnering with the university community.”

Calgary was a late addition to the TLC³ initiative, starting about two years after the other six sites. The Calgary site was chosen because it involved families in different circumstances from the other sites – they are generally better educated and have higher incomes. The University Child Care Centre serves preschool children whose parents are faculty, staff or students.

When word first got out that TLC³ had gone to the University Child Care Centre, there was some criticism locally. Why should the university community get this funding? One critic was adamant that “other programs need it more.” The TLC³ team pointed out that some parents may need more help with parenting than others, but all parents can use some support. This same critic is now an enthusiastic supporter of the project.

A common misunderstanding of the University Child Care Centre is that it is funded and operated by the University of Calgary. The University owns the building, but like most child care centres, this one relies solely on parent fees and fund-raising. The Centre is operated by a Board of Directors made up of parents, student representatives and University appointees.

“We were so fortunate to get this funding from TLC³,” says Maria. “Because of this funding and the programs we have been able to develop and share, we have become somewhat of a community resource. We get calls all the time now. We give our time to talk about what we are doing and learning. It’s not about us – it’s about the well-being of the children.”

Maria can see, hear and feel the difference that TLC³ has made at the University Child Care Centre. "When I first arrived, staff were more subdued. Now, you never know when staff or children are going to burst into song. The love of music and dance has grown tenfold here."

Relationships have changed. Parents who used to drop off or pick up their children quickly en route to and from work or school are more likely to stay and talk with staff and other parents. "They are a lot more social. They are also more likely to raise issues about their children with us. If I'm not sure what advice to give, I can call friends in the university – contacts that were made through T TLC³," Maria says.

Parents with more education and higher incomes may approach questions differently – these parents are more likely to want to read up on child development and consult experts – but the questions are common to parenthood in general. Is this normal? Why isn't my child talking yet? Why is he having these nightmares?

The University Child Care Centre entered into a partnership with Calgary Family Connections to offer the Parent-Child Mother Goose program at the Centre. The Mother Goose program supports the parent-child relationship and language development through songs, stories and rhymes. It gives parents and young children new ways to enjoy each other. It sets aside time to be close.

Brenda Sauvé led the Parent-Child Mother Goose program during the week for parents and children enrolled in the University Child Care Centre, and also held a Saturday program for families who responded to an invitation sent out via the campus mail. The opportunity was appreciated by all the parents who participated, Brenda says, but the Saturday moms and dads were especially pleased to get to know other parents and children.

It took some parents awhile to get comfortable participating. But once they did, "boy, did we ever start loosening up!" says Brenda. University Child Care Centre staff have been trained in the Parent-Child Mother Goose program so the program can be continued without the help of TLC³ funding. Like parents, some staff needed encouragement to stop worrying about how they sounded, and just start singing. "Trust me. I have no voice, and it doesn't stop me," Maria told them.

The Parent-Child Mother Goose program is usually for parents, but Maria tells of one family who expressed concern that their little boy had not become close with his grandmother. It was decided that she would participate in the program with him. "She came for six months. It changed their whole involvement together."

The Parents as Teachers (PAT) program, which helps parents understand how to support their child's healthy development, had a group of enthusiastic parents who welcomed home visits from Brenda during their child's infancy and in the preschool

period. But when other parents were asked about joining the program, fitting the home visits into the family schedule was identified as a problem. The PAT program may not continue if there is not enough interest.

One of the very tangible outcomes of TLC³ is the toy lending library and the reading resource library. “They are one of the few libraries of their kind in the city,” says Maria. Developed by Shelley Bergman, the libraries provide fact sheets with research Tips and Quips on child development, and Toy Write-Up sheets that give practical ideas on various ways that parents and caregivers can use play to support children’s exploration and mastery of their social and physical world.

Shelley documented the process she went through in setting up the libraries so that others could learn what is involved in start-up and maintenance. Staff were trained in cataloguing, documentation, borrowing and return procedures, cleaning and care of the toys, so that this resource can be sustained into the future.

TLC³ helped strengthen creative links between the Child Care Centre and the University. As a result, the Child Care Centre is assisting in the development of new programs for young children’s learning.

In 2000, a graduate student in applied psychology was hired to develop the Child as Scientist program for four-year-old children. The eight-week program, based on cognitive development research, has four modules on biology – how young children form theories about physical changes and growth they see in themselves and other living things. A program manual outlines activities and materials that can be used for this age group. Parents receive “tips and quips” explaining the research and suggesting fun activities that can be done at home.

The program is being used, refined and evaluated at the Centre. If it proves to be an effective way to stimulate “biological thinking” among four-year-olds, it will make a lasting contribution to understanding and promoting cognitive development among preschoolers. Funding to continue this work has been obtained from federal research grants.

In 2002, the Centre began testing the use of a development-based story crafting program to see how it improves children’s story-telling skills. Anne McKeough, associate professor in the Department of Educational Psychology, who is on both the local TLC³ advisory group and the TLC³ National Advisory Committee, developed the program.

Contacts with the wider community have expanded. A lecture series, called Knowing and Growing Together, is open to the community. At least 60 invitations are sent out for each lecture to centres, agencies, schools, hospitals and other organizations. The lecture series is another of the ways in which the Centre shares

the benefits of TLC³ with the community. The plan is to continue the lectures, capitalizing on the goodwill that has been built up in the university community and around the city.

In a province where early childhood educators are difficult to retain because of low salaries, TLC³ will be sustained in another, more indirect way – through staff morale. “It has enabled us to give staff opportunities to learn new skills. It has provided new resources for them to use with the children. It has made this a more interesting and vibrant place to work,” says Maria.

TLC³ in Regina

In Regina, TLC³ helped Anne Luke “unfold my dream a little more.” Her dream has always been “to invite families into this exciting world of learning and living with children and to meet their needs in supportive and positive ways.”

She founded the Regina Early Learning Centre about 25 years ago to pursue that dream. The Centre serves low-income children and families, mostly First Nations or Métis, from across the city. The past five years are called “the TLC³ years” at the Centre, says Anne, and they have been years of transformation.

Before TLC³, the Centre served children aged three to five and their families. There was a preschool program for the children, and an outreach program to involve parents. “I was aware that we were missing an important part of the development of these children before they came here. TLC³ allowed us to start serving parents and children from birth to three, and prenatally as well. It also enabled us to develop a special expertise in family literacy, and to enrich the preschool curriculum.”

The Centre began providing the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program for children up to age three. This program aims to strengthen and support the parent-child bond and help parents understand how children develop and what they can do to promote healthy development. It includes home visits, group meetings with families, and developmental screening.

Joint parent-staff workshops have built closer relationships between staff and parents. These are family-friendly events for which the Centre provides not only an informative and fun program for parents, but also transportation, child care and a meal. TLC³ funded family literacy programs as part of outreach to parents, including Come Read With Me and PRINTS. (An Aboriginal PRINTS is being developed by an Aboriginal staff member and the original program authors.)

TLC³ has influenced the curriculum of the preschool in important ways. One of the first things that TLC³ funding was used for was in-service training for teachers, focusing on cognitive and language development. “At first, the training was

something they had to learn and get used to. Then we went through a period of adapting what we had learned. Now it is simply part of the tool belt of all our teachers,” says Anne.

The people who work at the Early Learning Centre have learned a tremendous amount over the past five years. It wasn't a matter of simply buying training and internalizing it. “One of the teachers said that everyone thinks we are a model program, but we know that we are always learning more and finding out how to do things better.”

The capacity to learn, adapt and grow is part of what makes this a model centre. For example, after learning and using the High Scope curriculum of plan-do-review in the preschool, the teachers adapted it to become plan-do-reflect. “Getting the children to think about what they had done seemed more productive than simply going over a checklist,” Anne says.

Now they are working on more techniques for that tool belt. “More recently, we have been using some techniques developed in Reggio Emilia, Italy to help provoke children's thinking a little more deeply.”

TLC³ contributed to child assessment practices as well. The Early Learning Centre was already known for its portfolios that show the child's life at preschool, and include photos and art as well as descriptions of projects and comments. The use of the portfolios has been refined. Teachers are given an outline of what to collect (for example, a self-portrait every three months) to make sure the portfolios illustrate how the child has progressed over the year. The portfolios are learning as well as assessment tools, as teachers use them to talk with the children about themselves.

Because TLC³ is so immersed in the life of the Early Learning Centre, it may be difficult for outsiders to distinguish it from everything else that's going on. But the people at the Centre see its impacts. “It has allowed us to do so much more to support families, to build on their strengths,” says Anne. “It's inspiring to hear a parent say ‘I never knew I could read to my kids and now I do it all the time.’ Or to see children who have such rich, powerful, creative ideas just bursting with excitement to show you what they have done and tell you what they have learned. These are the ‘wows’ that keep us going.”

They keep the Centre going through the tough parts. There are families who are overwhelmed by hardship or torn apart by violence, and children who end up in foster care. In those instances, the Centre is sometimes the only stability in the child's life – a place of familiar faces, comfort and hugs. “But we have to recognize that we can only do so much. The lives of our families are so embedded in historical circumstances and socio-economic policies. It takes enormous time and effort just to do this little bit that we do,” says Anne.

TLC³ had such an impact on the Early Learning Centre over the past five years that it had to redefine itself. “We knew that we were no longer a preschool only,” says Anne. The Centre’s mission statement was rewritten to reflect its new goals and capacities. It stated: “The Regina Early Learning Centre works cooperatively with low income families to provide programs which foster the healthy development of children from birth to five years of age.”

Now the challenge is to sustain those new capacities. The additional programming has increased the burden of administration and fund-raising. But it has also created opportunities. “We were already well known locally, but being part of this national project increased our profile and credibility in the wider community,” says Anne. “We are being told that we are a leader.”

Ties to the community have been strengthened in a number of ways. For example, the Advisory Committee for TLC³ had members from a variety of organizations, including the University of Saskatchewan, the Government of Saskatchewan, and the Regina Health and School Board.

The Centre is now a service delivery partner in the new KidsFirst program in Saskatchewan. KidsFirst provides home visiting to children and their parents who are identified through screening at birth. There is also an early learning and care and family support component. The Regina Early Learning Centre is one of four KidsFirst sites in Regina.

However, securing continued financial support for programming for children under three who are not part of KidsFirst (because they were born before the program started) has been a struggle. In addition, a key staff person for the PAT program and family outreach was on long-term sick leave due to an accident. “Training staff to offer this program costs money, and there just aren’t trained people available in our area to be hired,” says Anne.

As always, the Centre adapted and did what it could so that families weren’t left out. It offered more group events that included families on the waiting list. And late in 2002, word came that funding would be forthcoming for the PAT program.

Overall, some of what TLC³ has achieved will be sustained as part of the learning culture of the Centre, but a significant part is still vulnerable to the ebb and flow of financial support. The Centre has always pursued a wide range of public and private sector funding opportunities to maintain a quality preschool, but now there is more on the line – more children and staff – if those funding dollars do not come through year after year.

According to Anne, “the more you do – the more you see there is still to do.” Rather than being discouraged about all the needs out there, “we just keep getting excited about the possibilities.”

Personally, Anne has done some soul-searching. “I looked inside myself. I did some thinking and reading about leadership. I think it’s about nurturing ideas and supporting people so they can take charge of their own learning. It’s about having a vision, and making it so that everyone can get on board. I have learned a lot during these TLC³ years.”

“One of the most important things that has been brought home to me is the importance of relationships. Not just between the parent and the child, or the teacher and the child, but between the parent and the teacher, between the person in my role and the staff, between us and the people who partner with us and support us. There has to be trust and respect in all those relationships.”

“I think having seven different sustainability stories is very worthwhile to chronicle and follow up. There are so many initiatives that get started and then they just stop.”

Ray DeV. Peters, National TLC³ Advisor

Professor, Department of Psychology, Queen’s University

Head of the Research Team, Better Beginnings, Better Futures

TLC³ in Meadow Lake

From the beginning, “community-based and community-paced” was the watchword of the TLC³ project at the Meadow Lake Tribal Council in northwest Saskatchewan. So it is not surprising that the future of TLC³ lies in community ownership.

Rhonda Schultz, TLC³ project coordinator for the Meadow Lake Tribal Council, describes TLC³ as a spark that helped energize communities to focus on the importance of the early years of child development. “I think we illuminated capacities that were already there. We spent a lot of time and energy telling parents, telling day care workers, telling communities ‘you can do it!’ That message was more important than any one specific thing we did,” says Rhonda.

TLC³, called One Foot Forward, supported many journeys of discovery and growing awareness. So a parent could say proudly “I am my child’s first teacher” or a day care worker could say confidently “I’m going to try this new program” or community members could say together “Let’s do something for our kids”.

When TLC³ came on the scene five years ago, the Meadow Lake Tribal Council was building the foundations for a comprehensive child care program. It had

incorporated the Meadow Lake Health and Social Development Authority to license and monitor all day care services, had partnered with the University of Victoria to develop an education curriculum for child care workers, and had obtained funding for a major expansion of child care spaces.

Most of the nine First Nations within the Meadow Lake Tribal Council had little in the way of child care services. TLC³ became part of the child care program just as the Meadow Lake Tribal Council was launching a major initiative to provide licensed child care for families in these communities.

The First Nations of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council are culturally diverse. There are two distinct cultural groups, the Dene and Cree people. The communities are also geographically dispersed. The farthest is about 400 kilometres away from the TLC³ home base in the offices of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council in the Flying Dust First Nation.

Freida Iron, coordinator of the child care program, had the job of working with communities to get the day cares off the ground. She notes that the technical demands of the licensing process in all these small communities were enough to occupy all her time. Having additional resources through TLC³ had a major impact on what could be accomplished in that early developmental period for the day cares.

“Because we had TLC³, Meadow Lake Tribal Council was able to focus on quality programming, provide training, buy books, toys and other resource materials, and involve parents. It has been a big boost for the communities and for the Meadow Lake Tribal Council,” says Freida. “Our leaders say that children are our future. We are learning what we can do to build that future.”

Marie McCallum, director of Meadow Lake Tribal Council’s Health and Social Development Program, credits TLC³ for expanding the understanding of child development among parents and others in the communities.

TLC³ engaged parents in ways that had not happened before. The TLC³ team went to people’s homes. They brought displays on child development and toys to community fairs and other events. They put out a newsletter, called Pitter Patter, that included tips on developmental markers and fun things to do with children. They were always asking parents how their infants and toddlers were doing.

Parents started to ask questions back. They started to invite TLC³ to return to their communities for gatherings. One parent asked for help to set up a parent-run play group in her basement. “These kids are growing by leaps and bounds. The parents run a great program,” says Rhonda, who is trained as a speech-language pathologist.

As the day cares began operating in one community and then another, TLC³ provided training and plans for activities for the child care staff. Jennifer Wilfing has worked with the day cares, as well as writing the Pitter-Patter newsletter. TLC³ has supported the day cares by demonstrating activities, helping with planning, providing useful materials and reinforcing the message about enhancing language and cognitive development. Training was provided in how to do developmental assessments.

“We pushed, but we didn’t impose. We offered help in the forms of materials and training. They have developed into a really skilled bunch of people,” says Rhonda. “The day cares are filled with happy kids, learning kids. The staff get satisfaction from their work, and they like learning too. They are not shy about asking for help either.”

There was training for both day care workers and parents in the Come Read With Me program, which was developed in Saskatchewan. Rhonda added her own training component with the day cares on ways to use books as part of everyday activities. When the program was being revised provincially, she contributed to the improvements.

“We have adapted other programs and materials,” says Rhonda. “But TLC³ is not just about how many toys and books you put in a day care or how many training days you provided for workers or parents. It’s about building relationships and providing support.”

Soon after TLC³ was initiated, the federal government, as part of its children’s agenda, provided funding to expand First Nations early childhood services. In addition to the day cares operating in eight First Nations (plus the parent-run play group in one community), there are Head Start programs in all nine. There are also two Early Childhood Intervention Programs (ECIP) for parents and young children with developmental delays. In addition, a number of speech aides have been trained to work with children of Nursery or Kindergarten age.

The way in which TLC³ was set up – as a time-limited project embedded in the Meadow Lake Health and Social Development Program – has contributed to a move towards integration of early childhood programming. “We are trying to develop a community of early childhood professionals, and we are clustering our resources,” says Rhonda. “We are integrating training, we are integrating resource libraries, we are integrating newsletters. We have begun to integrate some of the forms. In this way, we are reducing redundancy, building a supportive network, and stretching our financial resources.”

With surplus funding that remains in the project's account, TLC³ will be hosting a parent-child conference in the spring of 2003 to discuss what TLC³ learned and what communities want. A parent handbook on how to grow a healthy learner has been developed. It highlights learning from TLC³ and will be used as a learning tool at the parent conference. There will also be a meeting on a Meadow Lake Tribal Council children's agenda. The feedback, knowledge and advice from these dialogues should help to identify potential future directions.

It will be up to the First Nations leadership to sustain the larger children's agenda, and it will be up to the communities to keep the focus on early childhood development. "TLC³ has left a legacy of learning. It's up to the communities to pick up the ball and run with it. Some will roll with it, and others may struggle. Whatever happens will happen when parents and communities are ready for it," Rhonda says.

There will still be support from the child care program when TLC³ is officially over. Rhonda and Freida are still there, but with expanded responsibilities. Post TLC³, Rhonda is the Meadow Lake Tribal Council speech-language pathologist and coordinator of the Early Childhood Intervention Program.

TLC³ has been a career-expanding experience for Rhonda, who says it may have spoiled her for a speech-language job anywhere else. "This experience has been so rich. We were always coming up with new ideas, and we were given the freedom within the Meadow Lake Tribal Council program to try them out. I just can't see myself going back to a regular job."

"One of the things that TLC³ has shown is that speech and language professionals have important roles to play in promotion and prevention, not just intervention. Their contributions in promoting language and cognitive development are easily embedded into everyday activities and existing curricula in day cares and parent-child groups."

Carol Crill Russell, National TLC³ Advisor
Invest in Kids Foundation

TLC³ in Toronto

Growing Together was already a model project when TLC³ came along. But TLC³ helped to give it new energy and allowed it to explore new directions for the future. "Because TLC³ was here, we were able to imagine where this project could go," says Denise Martyn, Director of Growing Together.

"It has allowed us to be innovative. That's really important. We have a terrific crew, and these people are not here for a big pay cheque. They are here because this is

a place that allows them to innovate – use their training, knowledge and ideas to develop programming that may be on the edge. It takes money and time to try things out. TLC³ gave us both.”

Growing Together is a prevention and early intervention project serving St. James Town, a massive high-rise apartment complex in downtown Toronto. With a population of about 28,000, this high-density neighbourhood is bigger than many cities. Most of its residents are immigrants who are struggling to adapt culturally and economically to a new country.

Before TLC³, the staff at Growing Together were identifying a number of young children with speech-language or cognitive delays, but they did not have a children’s program to meet the need. TLC³ filled the gap. “TLC³ was our first children’s program. By that, I mean it focused specifically on children, with supports for parents,” says Denise.

TLC³ at the Toronto site targetted young children identified with speech-language and/or cognitive difficulties. Children were referred to the TLC³ program – which was nested within Growing Together – by staff, agencies and families in the community. Children were assessed before being enrolled in the TLC³ centre-based program, called Jumpstart. Home visiting was also provided to TLC³ families.

Sustainability for this site has come in the form of a three-year grant from the Ontario government’s Early Years Challenge Fund. The TLC³ team has been integrated into Growing Together as part of a new program called Building Blocks.

The TLC³ Jumpstart program, which continues to operate, was developed to help children aged two and a half to five to overcome speech-language and cognitive difficulties. It uses a play-based and theme-based approach. Children attend twice a week for two hours at a time, in groups of eight. The program is organized into three-month blocks of time, and each child’s progress is reviewed regularly.

At the beginning of each two-week theme, the parents receive a resource sheet that tells them about the theme, gives them a summary of the story and the main concepts, describes the planned activities (e.g. walk to the store to buy fruit to make fruit salad), and lists new words the children will be learning. It also suggests some easy games using household props and materials so that parents can continue the learning process at home. Often, stories or the words of a song are included.

Every day, parents are given a one-page picture information sheet about what their child did that day. Staff talk with the children about what they did and they circle the pictures together (e.g. played with blocks). Parents are encouraged to talk to their child about the day’s activities.

The Jumpstart newsletter goes out every three months to parents. It contains general information on the program. There is a song corner, neighbourhood information such as drop-in centres and libraries, and articles of interest to parents, like bedtime routines. The ideas come from staff and parents.

“The parents become very involved,” says TLC³ coordinator and early childhood consultant, Deirdre McKibbon. “They realize that the partnership needs to be there. We are not the experts. We are not going to ‘fix’ their kids. We need them to work with us. Sharing information is one of the ways we facilitate this partnership with parents.”

Because of the high proportion of Tamil families in the community at this time (the mix of cultures changes with the flow of immigration), it was important that the TLC³ home visitors be Tamil-speaking. As well as providing support in the home, such as bringing toys and modelling play with the child, the home visitors co-facilitate Jumpstart one day a week each, working with the early childhood educator.

Parames Kanapthillai, home visitor and Jumpstart co-facilitator, explains that Tamil mothers are good caregivers who have a strong bond with their children. “But there is this overwhelming belief that all their child’s developmental needs will be met at school. Back home, stimulation of young children was usually done by grandparents and other extended family, and most of them are not here in Canada,” she says. “We are working to get the message across that parents need to get involved with their child’s development long before school.”

Sensitivity to the immigrant experience is important, and so is sensitivity to social or cultural stigma. “When we started, many parents were afraid of a program that would label their child or them as not being good enough. Now we have parents who are disappointed that their next child doesn’t qualify for the program because he or she is not delayed,” says Deirdre.

In many of these cases, the parents’ approach to nurturing changed with the second child because of what they learned about supporting children’s early development from TLC³.

The home visitors build a relationship of trust with the parents, and the children know the home visitors when they come to Jumpstart. Psychologist Deb Parker makes the children’s assessments unthreatening and supportive. Deb describes one little boy who was almost four years old, and was not talking. “Not at all, in Tamil or English. He also made no eye contact. He ran into walls. I was really concerned. It looked like signs of autism. His mother felt there was something wrong, but she was hoping it would get fixed when he got to school.”

Deb took out a string of wooden beads while she talked to his mother. After about 20 minutes, he took the string and handed it back to her, so she showed him how to put the beads on the string. He started to explore other toys in the room. Within a matter of weeks at Jumpstart, he was using sounds, and within a year, he was speaking in full sentences. He also makes eye contact now. "He's a sensitive little guy," says Deb. "His mom goes to a Growing Together mother's group, and the other mothers have noticed the changes in him. They are saying if this can happen with this child, what can they do for other kids?"

Deirdre says that the TLC³ project in Toronto "really blossomed" in the last couple of years. "It took some time to evolve. We are using a team approach which recognizes that everyone has something to contribute. We get together once a week to discuss how best to help our kids and their families. Everyone on the team puts so much heart into this."

Growing Together is built on partnerships. It started in 1993 as a joint initiative of the Hincks Centre for Children's Mental Health (now Hincks-Dellcrest) and the City of Toronto Public Health. Public health nurses contacted all mothers with newborns in the community and offered a home visit. During the home visit, an assessment was made and parents were offered services to meet their needs.

Through Growing Together, parents might continue with home visiting, receive individual counselling, join a parent group or club or a community activity, like a community kitchen. Infant monitoring was done through a questionnaire sent to parents at regular intervals. More in-depth assessments were done at the developmental clinic. The combination of assessment of newborns and home visiting became a model for the provincial Healthy Babies, Healthy Children program, which provides hospital-based assessments at birth and home visiting for children identified to be at risk for poor developmental outcomes.

Growing Together currently has 17 funders and a variety of programs for children and families. TLC³ has helped expand the network of Growing Together partners. For example, Deirdre made contacts at the University of Toronto Department of Occupational Therapy that resulted in student placements at Growing Together. The Department of Pediatric Dentistry is planning to have dentistry students on placement to provide free screening, group consultation and referral for the children of St. James Town. Dental problems in young children can, among other things, affect their speech.

Through TLC³, the provincial PreSchool Speech and Language Services program became involved with Growing Together, providing on-site services one day a week. Additional funding was found to enable Deirdre to offer the Parent-Child Mother Goose program for parents and infants. This program focuses on early language development and parent-child bonding and is delivered with a Tamil co-facilitator.

With funding for its new Building Blocks program, Growing Together will be able to enhance screening and assessment to identify problems and intervene early with programs suited to children's needs. "It is important to know what is going on," says Denise. "A child who is acting out may have a social-emotional problem or he may be frustrated because he can't communicate. A child may not be talking well because there is a speech-language issue or a learning disability or maybe it's because his teeth hurt."

There are 400 babies born every year in the St. James Town neighbourhood, which is known for having the highest-density population in North America. There are new immigrant children arriving all the time. "It's very challenging and very exciting. We are building on what we are learning," says Denise. "Like TLC³, we will be nesting targeted programs within the larger community-based project."

TLC³ in Saint-Rémi

"I was in a paper shop one day and there was a mother and her little boy, about three years old, looking at birthday cards. The little boy looked around and pointed: 'What's that, mommy?' His mother replied: 'Those are books.' Her son said: 'I want one!' The mother said no, but the little boy asked again. She said in an angry voice: 'Don't pester me anymore. You will get some books when you go to school.' I was totally disconcerted. I wanted to tell them about our program. But she took his arm and hustled him out the door."

The person who tells that anecdote is Nathalie Persico, coordinator of the TLC³ project in Saint-Rémi, Québec. It is a reminder of how much this initiative on behalf of children's language and cognitive development is needed in this small community and the surrounding villages and rural countryside.

All the TLC³ sites have grown and evolved over the past five years, but none more so than Saint-Rémi. It has gone through a major developmental process and emerged as an independent and thriving community organization committed to improving the early development and well-being of children from birth to age five.

The TLC³ project in Saint-Rémi celebrated its coming-of-age when a local non-profit organization was incorporated to administer programs and raise funds to continue the work in the future. In 2002, the project adopted a new logo and name – Apprendre en Coeur or To Learn from the Heart.

In the beginning, the leadership of the TLC³ project lay with a team from the Laboratory of Infant Studies at the University of Québec at Montréal. The team developed a new program, called ALI, which stands for Activités de Lecture Interactive (interactive reading activities).

Saint-Rémi was chosen as the community where the team, led by Gérard Malcuit, would try out the new program, train people to use it, and evaluate the results. ALI promotes early language and cognitive development from birth to age five. The child does not sit passively listening to a parent read, but is encouraged to talk, looking at pictures, linking them to words and telling stories. The children develop verbal and thinking skills while learning to enjoy books and having fun with a parent or other caregiver.

Parents are encouraged to talk to their infants, and play with them with toys like puppets and rattles. Books, like small soft plastic ones for the bath, are introduced for children as young as three months. Parents are shown how to use ALI by someone who is trained in the program. Follow-up visits are made to make sure they are using the techniques well.

ALI is also for use in child care centres, and there is a training program for early childhood educators and others who work with young children. The ALI program includes different strategies and materials for babies (ALI-Bébé), toddlers (ALI-Bambin for 15 to 36 months) and preschoolers (ALI-Explorateur for age 3 and 4). An intervention program called ALI-DAC was developed for children who are having difficulties.

ALI is no longer just in and around Saint-Rémi. Now that it has been developed, refined and tested in Saint-Rémi, it is being made available more broadly in the province. Child care centres in other communities in Québec may be licensed by the university to use the ALI program materials and techniques.

After years of community capacity-building, the local ALI Action Group in Saint-Rémi was eager to take over running and funding its own affairs. An agreement was reached between the community and the university team, facilitated by the Hincks-Dellcrest Institute. The corporation in Saint-Rémi plans not only to continue delivering the ALI program, but to provide other services in response to community needs in future.

The new community corporation has successfully begun fund-raising to continue and expand its operations after the TLC³ funding ends. Several community members have been trained in the ALI techniques so they can train others. ALI is being used by child care providers and parents. More than 300 children have experienced the program.

Saint-Rémi is in an agricultural area where many families are isolated by distance and lack of transportation, and many parents have low levels of education. Saint-Rémi is part of the 1-2-3 GO! community development project, which focuses on

child development in the first three years, particularly among families who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

1-2-3 GO! has been the sponsor organization and a supportive partner for ALI Saint-Rémi from the start. Other partners include the health and social service agency (Centre Local de Services Communautaires or CLSC), the child care centre, the library, the school board and area schools.

Saint-Rémi has also branched out beyond its own borders to assist the neighbouring community of St.-Clotilde by sharing its expertise in the ALI program. “There are needs crying out to us from families outside Saint-Rémi,” says Nathalie. “We feel we should share what we have learned over the past five years with other families.”

One of the major advantages of this program for a rural area is that parents, who may not be able to travel to a child care centre or library for training, can be shown how to use ALI in their homes.

“ALI is well embedded in the community,” says Ginette Savoie, coordinator of 1-2-3 GO! Saint-Rémi. “More families are learning the program all the time. Saint-Rémi has been so fortunate to have this resource, and I am pleased that the new autonomous organization is expanding into neighbouring municipalities where there is a great need among the families.”

Raymonde Dumouchel, president of the community corporation, says: “We are making progress. We have an organization that is building for the future. There are many families who believe, as we do, in the importance of stimulating young children and encouraging language development. The smiles and hunger to learn of the children are what keep us working so hard!”

TLC³ in Dartmouth

It is one of those small moments. The receptionist at the Dartmouth Family Resource Centre recounts how a mother and young child came in one day and the mother got busy with someone, and the child was waiting. The little girl held up a book. “I knew it was an important thing to do,” the receptionist said later. She took the little girl on her lap and started to read.

If you don't know what you are listening for, this story may not sound like much. But for Natalie Downey, TLC³ coordinator in Dartmouth and a speech-language pathologist, it is a heartening indication that what she and the rest of the TLC³ team have been working towards is happening.

“We call it infusion,” Natalie says. “It’s about absorbing the principles of TLC³ into an organization so they become part of everyday practice.” From the beginning, TLC³ Nova Scotia focused on:

- the importance of language and cognition in the healthy and holistic development of the child;
- building on the strengths and capacities of families and communities to promote child well-being; and
- respect for diversity and participation of community members in developing and delivering appropriate, community-based services for families.

Five years later, those principles are not only infused into the Dartmouth Family Resource Centre, and the preschool of its TLC³ partner agency, the Dartmouth Boys and Girls Club, but they are also being used as a basis for spreading the TLC³ model province-wide. In 2002, the Nova Scotia government announced a new Early Language and Learning Grant (TLC⁴) as an integral part of the development of a Comprehensive System for Early Childhood Development. Nova Scotia added a fourth TLC – “Through Linking Communities”.

The TLC⁴ program is implemented through Family Resource Centres, and consists of regional and local service approaches. It includes speech-language pathologists working at the regional level, providing training and consultation and sharing innovative practices. Family Resource Centres can develop their own local programs, and must demonstrate the integration of best practices in early language promotion.

The provincial government has been actively monitoring TLC³ from the beginning, with a view to learning from its experience. “We actually struggled to describe our model,” says Jean Hughes, with the nursing faculty of Dalhousie University. Jean worked on the original project development team for TLC³ in Dartmouth and has remained actively involved. “The programs that we deliver are important, but they are only part of a whole approach. You start with a philosophy of wellness, empowerment and trust and you build from there.”

Natalie’s role is far different from the usual role of a clinical speech-language pathologist. She works with all families, not just those whose children are identified as having speech-language difficulties. “It was an adjustment when I started,” says Natalie. “I kept thinking ‘how many people have I seen today, as a clinician?’ But this model is so much more powerful. It’s so much broader.”

“She gets to work with the families where they are at,” says Mandy Kay-Raining Bird, from the School of Communication Disorders faculty at Dalhousie University. Mandy is on the local TLC³ project team and is also a TLC³ National Advisor. “Natalie gets to know them as individuals, and supports them as they build their knowledge. Often, the least capable parents are the ones who get dropped from

clinical interventions because they are the most difficult to involve. When there is a waiting list of eager parents, they fall to the bottom.”

Part of what is unique about Natalie’s role is that she is based in a community organization, and she sees the parents regularly, not just for an assessment of their child or a follow-up clinic visit. “Sometimes, what is most important for the parents is what happens during conversations in the breaks or after the programs,” Natalie says.

The Dartmouth North area is characterized by low income, high unemployment, transience, and low literacy rates. More than a third of the city’s children up to age four live in this area. The Dartmouth Family Resource Centre was established in 1994 as one of the first resources in the community for children under school age. Its mission was to provide a “nurturing and enabling” community environment to improve the well-being of young children and their families.

TLC³ was embedded in this organization because the two philosophies were compatible. TLC³ added a special focus on and resources for early language, emergent literacy and cognitive development. Natalie delivered programs directly to families, and trained staff and some parents to lead the programs. At the Boys and Girls Club, she provided ongoing consultations to the preschool staff, including language facilitation strategies and materials to be used in a variety of learning contexts.

Programs delivered through TLC³ included Hanen’s Learning Language and Loving It and You Make the Difference, which build parental awareness of their role in supporting their child’s development, and suggest ways to build learning into daily activities. Other TLC³ programs included Baby Talk and Parent-n-Tot programs for infants and for toddlers.

Natalie started creating backup materials on how to embed language development in preschool settings for the early childhood educators she was training in Learning Language and Loving It. Then TLC³ staff and child development staff at the Dartmouth Family Resource Centre and its sister centre downtown, called the Parent Resource Centre, went a step further. They collaborated on a set of materials and created a comprehensive framework to ensure that parent involvement and language and cognitive development are an integral part of all child development work, not just TLC³ activities.

With TLC³ ending, Natalie has a new role as coordinator and speech-language pathologist of the Growing Together project in Dartmouth, which is based in the Dartmouth Family Resource Centre. Modelled on the original Growing Together in Toronto, this project provides assessments of newborns, home visiting and other interventions for families at risk.

In addition, the Dartmouth Family Resource Centre is participating in the new Nova Scotia initiative in early language and learning, and has become one of four community-based agencies in the province providing regional speech-language services.

Mandy and Natalie both contributed to the development of the government's early childhood initiative through work on a provincial advisory committee. There has been sharing of learning and advice both ways. Jane Fitzgerald, Administrator of the Family and Children Services Division, Department of Community Services, is a TLC³ National Advisor, and representatives of the Department participated on the TLC³ local advisory group.

"The partnership worked out extremely well," says Jane. "It was such a positive experience to collaborate on an innovative project and see it through from a pilot to a provincial strategy."

Natalie has many stories about the positive effects of TLC³ on individual families. "One of our parent volunteers said it took all her courage to step through the doorway the first time. She was stressed out and desperate. Now she is passionate about helping other parents at the Centre, and she and her daughter are doing so well. The word is getting around that there is help available here and it's okay to ask."

"I know a mom who started to get to know another family at a playground. One of the kids had really limited language for his age. This mom told her friend she knew somebody who could help, and arranged for us to talk. Now that little boy is in a special program."

Natalie is taking what she learned from the TLC³ experience into her new role at Growing Together. "I have learned so much about how to work successfully with families and communities in the context of real people and real lives. It's not just a matter of telling families what to do. You have to understand the obstacles they face, and work in partnership with them."

"The five-year commitment of TLC³ funding enabled the Dartmouth Family Resource Centre to pilot a model that we could learn from and use in our provincial strategy. That kind of opportunity doesn't come around very often. To acknowledge the contribution, we named Nova Scotia's new early language and learning grant program after this project."

Jane Fitzgerald, National TLC³ Advisor
Administrator of the Family and Children Services Division
Nova Scotia Department of Community Services

Part 3: The Legacy of the Learning Communities

After reading the descriptions of the sites in this report, you already know that there is a different answer to the sustainability question at each site. And in every case, there is a legacy that testifies that TLC³ was there and that it made a difference.

The sites all did something different, yet they did many things in common.

They embedded strategies that enhanced young children's language and cognitive development in a variety of settings – child care centres, preschools, family resource centres, neighbourhood or community centres and the children's own homes.

They supported development of positive relationships between parents and their young children and between other caregivers and young children, and involved them in shared activities.

They worked with and through professionals from different disciplines –including speech-language pathologists, early childhood educators, home visitors, psychologists and teachers – and introduced them to new tools and practices through training, coaching and modelling. They did the same for parents.

They worked with families as and where they found them. They played with children and modelled techniques for parents in crowded, high-rise towers in big cities and in quiet living rooms in rural countrysides. They worked with families struggling to raise their children in the midst of poverty, isolation, and cultural dislocation. They worked with well-educated families with good incomes who were seeking information on how to connect better with their young children.

They shared some important understandings and values, including these:

- Parents are the most important influence in the lives of children, especially in the early years, and often have capacities that are unrecognized (even by themselves). They respond to support, information and encouragement.
- The earlier that children's language and cognitive development is stimulated and nurtured, and emerging problems are assessed and addressed, the better.
- Programs should focus on the strengths of families, not on deficits.
- Relationships matter – with families, with partners, with staff and colleagues, with funders, and with the wider community.

- Sensitivity to cultural, language and community diversity must be embedded in any effort to reach out to families.
- Practice must be aligned with fundamental values.

They used the flexibility they were given to deliver off-the-shelf packaged programs, adapt or enhance existing programs, or develop new ones. They did all of the above. Where an existing, proven program fit community needs, they used it. But everyone developed new resources of some kind. If it wasn't a new program, it was a resource kit, a curriculum, a how-to manual, tips sheets, a newsletter or something else.

They met challenges which they turned into learning experiences. Everyone ran into problems of some sort. At most of the sites, there were critical staff changes that created gaps and upset the delivery plan, for example. People adapted and regrouped. The evaluation was a struggle because at most of the sites, the TLC³ coordinator did not have experience with evaluation. That hurdle was overcome too.

They actively engaged in outreach – giving presentations, writing articles, joining organizations, sitting on advisory groups, liaising with government officials and elected representatives, providing training within and outside their organizations, and distributing informative materials.

They transformed the organizations in which the project was embedded. The transformation could be subtle – as TLC³ values were absorbed into everyday activities, for example. But there was also new organizational and community capacity created. It was sometimes in the form of a new organization and nearly always in the form of new partnerships with a variety of community, professional and other organizations.

Finally, they were all able to create a legacy for young children and their parents. The legacy resides in empowered parents and other caregivers, transformed organizations, raised awareness, new relationships, networks and partnerships, new resources for families, engaged communities, and much learning.

Next Steps: Learning and Sharing

The next steps for TLC³ involve pulling together all that has been learned and sharing it broadly. Through that learning and sharing, TLC³ will be sustained both at the community level and at the national level.

Unless there is long-term tracking of TLC³ families, we may never know exactly what the sustained impacts were on individuals. But the local projects have already

witnessed the difference made in lives being lived today, like the children who are talking and laughing who did not speak before, the children who were behind their peers at age three who are doing well in preschool, or the mothers who gained self-esteem by helping other families cope with the stresses and fears they had experienced themselves.

“Other studies have shown us what to expect, and that is modest improvements in young children’s functioning. In some cases, even that disappears quickly. You often have to look 15 years down the road to see what was really achieved, says Freda Martin. “If you can start kids on a different trajectory – because they learn to talk more, they feel secure, they have more confidence, they build better relationships – they may end up somewhere quite different from the life they might have led.”

Beyond the impacts on individual parents and children who participated in TLC³ programs, there is something else that will be sustained at these sites. That is the commitment to strengthening family and community capacity. At all the sites, the link has clearly been made between a supportive community and healthy and happy children.

Freda is now retired as Director of the Gail Appel Institute, but she continues to lead TLC³. She is convinced that TLC³ will have some interesting ideas to contribute to the question of how funders and managers can best support optimum early childhood development. “I think the general message has gotten through that the early years are very important, but the nature of effective supports remains an open question. We hope to add to the knowledge base from the TLC³ experience in enhancing early language and cognitive development.”

TLC³ was experienced from different angles and perspectives. The national project management team has been thinking about its own learning. Freda and Nancy note that the philosophy of the team, while not openly articulated in the beginning, was based on a principle. The principle was that the same factors that support optimal growth for children – appropriate stimulation, supportive structures and a secure, reflective, non-intrusive but reliably present relationship – would also support caregivers, organizations and communities.

“I think this approach worked well – the sites certainly exceeded our expectations for them,” says Freda. “It was also pretty hard on them at times. In the early going, for example, they kept asking us what we wanted them to do. We asked, instead, what they thought would work well for the families in their communities.”

The result, says Nancy, is that the sites “were empowered by the opportunity to be creative, and they gained confidence from it. They also passed that sensibility on to the families they served.”

Something similar happened between the Lawson Foundation and TLC³. The Foundation acted as a learning partner and collaborator, and took the risk of allowing the project to evolve. According to Connie Gardiner, Foundation President, who attends every symposium: “We have learned to trust and respect and value the unique contribution of every project participant.”

The TLC³ experience helped to inform the Foundation’s vision to be a source of support for sustainable community-based programs that positively influence quality of life for Canadian families. Connie says her board continues to be interested in early childhood development and parenting, and is looking for another initiative that it hopes will “catch fire” the way TLC³ did. “I’m thrilled with the way it turned out. The people involved were so dedicated and put so much energy into TLC³. The sites really took ownership. They listened to their communities and they evolved. I think that is why they are sustainable.”

The national management team, like the sites, feels that it was empowered by this project. “The Lawson Foundation chose us, just as we chose the sites. So it was a major opportunity for us too. We had not done a project like this before. We have all grown through this experience,” says Freda.

The national advisors have also expressed their appreciation. For example: “It was hugely valuable to me personally to have exposure to and collegial relationships with a wide range of early childhood experts from various disciplines,” says Carol Crill Russell. “On a personal level, it has given me a wonderful opportunity to meet people from across the country who share the same passion,” says Jane Fitzgerald. “The symposium has been a bookmark in my calendar every year. I look forward to being ‘fed’ with ideas.”

In the spring of 2003, the local site representatives, the national advisors, the funder and the national management team will gather again for the last annual symposium of TLC³. The purpose will be to share the results of the site evaluations and discuss similarities and differences, outcomes and impacts. Participants will seek to identify what was learned from this experience.

After the brainstorming, the challenge will be to take the evaluation findings and the symposium discussion, together with all the other information that has been amassed over the past five years on TLC³, to the next level – to identify the learning that may be useful for others interested in enhancing early childhood development, and how to share it.
