

MLTC- One Foot Forward EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Program Description

The Meadow Lake Tribal Council (MLTC) is the umbrella political and administrative structure of nine Dene and Cree First Nations in northwestern Saskatchewan. MLTC's TLC³ program was developed in close conjunction with the MLTC Child Care Program. Initial planning of TLC³ began in July, 1997 under the direction of MLTC's Speech and Language Pathologist and Child Care Coordinator. Resources received under TLC³ were targeted to improve programming for children, parents and daycare workers working within the MLTC Child Care Program. The Child Care Program maintained authority over the licensing and monitoring of the facilities and workers. The primary objective of TLC³ was to enhance the existing child care programming to children, parents and daycare workers using specific targeted program enhancements.

The first two years of TLC³ operation, from September 1, 1997 to September 1, 1999, were primarily developmental. During this period, there were only two community-based child care facilities in operation - the English River Day Home and the Flying Dust Daycare, which operated off-reserve in the town of Meadow Lake under a provincial childcare license. These two centres provided the basis for the development and pilot-testing of TLC³ programs and materials. Feedback on these programs and materials was used to refine programmatic, implementation and consultative approaches for the incorporation of TLC³ into new childcare centres, which were established in other Meadow Lake First Nations (MLFNs) in later years. To date, eight of the nine MLFNs have established some type of child care program. These include seven child care centres, one day home and one parent-run play school.

The MLTC TLC³ logic model was developed by MLTC TLC³ as a means to establish and articulate clear linkages among overall TLC³ goals, specific MLTC TLC³ programs and interventions and intended outcomes. Four major "groups" were targeted for TLC³ intervention: children aged 0 - 6 years, their parents, the child care workers and the child care centres. Within each of these four target groups/settings, four basic areas of early childhood education and development were also targeted. These included language, cognition, social skills and literacy skills. Language and cognition were essentially core areas of the entire national TLC³ Program. Literacy skills were addressed as part of MLTC'S 20-year Economic Development Plan and social skills were added in recognition of broad social justice issues within the MLFNs.

A total of 163 children from MLTC participated in the TLC³ Project. Fifty-two percent were female and 48% were male. Thirty-two percent were under 2 years of age, 40% were 2 or 3 years and 28% were four years of age or older. Ninety-seven percent lived with their birth parent(s). The main language of 96.5% of the children was English. The main language of 5 children was Dene. Twenty-four children also understood Cree, 17 understood Dene and 4 Dene speakers also understood English.

A number of programs were selected by MLTC's TLC³ staff to promote cognitive, social, language and literacy development. These included four core programs:

- Bright Start Cognitive Curriculum for cognitive development, selected primarily because it had been developed specifically as a resource for daycare programs. This program also has an accompanying training program for daycare workers, identified explicit outcomes for children and comes with an accompanying handbook for parents.
- In terms of language development, the Hanen Centre's *It Takes Two to Talk* Program and the First Nations Edition of *You Make the Difference* were selected because they are both designed to promote social and linguistic development in young children based on the relationship between caregiver and child.
- The program chosen for literacy aid was the *Come Read With Me* Program, chosen because it was developed in Saskatchewan and was largely developed in specific response to First Nations requests and needs for literacy development.
- Regarding social skills, the *Let's be Social* program, a pro-social development program for children aged 3 - 6 years, was chosen because it gave practical suggestions for developing social skills in a preschool setting.

All of the above programs were selected with the anticipation of low adult literacy. As such, all programs are high in visual components, low in professional and technical jargon and are presented in a straightforward and simple lesson plan format that requires minimal front-end instruction to child care workers who will be using the programs. Because of the significant geographic distance between the eight participating communities, TLC³ staff were not able to provide intensive modelling and supervision. As such, programs were chosen that were largely self-contained in terms of learning objectives, theory, curriculum and materials and which did not require extensive pre-use training. A number of training sessions were provided to child care workers to support the use of the above programs.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the TLC³ program in MLTC used both standardized measures to assess the children's level of development as well as key informant and parent interviews to gather qualitative data about the program and its impact.

The standardized measures used were the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised and the Denver Developmental Screen II. The use of these two measures as a means to measure project outcomes did not prove to be successful. There were two primary reasons for this: the lack of adequate resources to test children in a timely and appropriate manner in the eight participating communities and the high turnover rate of children in the MLFN child care centres.

The key informant interviews and parent feedback proved to be useful and highlights of their results are presented below. Both parents and key informants voiced strong support for the TLC³ Program. Both groups felt that the program had enhanced the quality of care in the child care centres and programs and that it should continue in the future.

Key Informant Feedback:

- Key informants felt that the three major issues facing young children in the MLFNs were the lack of parental involvement in the lives of their children, issues related to developmental delay and language development, and the lack of positive parenting behaviours.
- Key informants felt that the TLC³ Program had contributed to a number of positive impacts on young children including:
 - an enhanced profile of young children in the community as equal partners in the circle of life - children, adults, Elders;
 - improved school readiness;
 - improved screening and diagnosis of language, learning and behavioural problems of young children;
 - earlier interventions language, learning and behavioural problems;
 - significantly improved turn-taking and sharing abilities;
 - development of more complex language skills in young children;
 - improved ability of young children in the TLC³ program to communicate more spontaneously, without stress or frustration; and
 - improved cognitive abilities in general.
- Perceptions of positive impacts of TLC³ on parents of young children identified by key informants included improved parental awareness of child development, improved positive parenting behaviours, improved communication between parents and children and improved cooperation between parents and child care service providers.
- Perceptions of positive impacts on child care providers included increased knowledge of child development, improved care giving skills, establishing routines in the child care centres and communicating these to parents and improved knowledge of early childhood education and practice.
- An overwhelming majority (96%) of key informant respondents also felt that TLC³ had a positive impact on the availability of programs and services for young children in the MLFNs, particularly community support for early childhood and child care services in the community.
- Key informants felt that the most effective features of TLC³ were the workshops, presentations and other training sessions which supported the packaged programs,

the support from MLTC TLC³ staff and the resource materials provided to the child care centres. The least effective features were felt to be the insufficient time spent in the communities by TLC³ staff, the lack of follow-up with individual children and that the project was only available in day care settings.

- Key informants made four major recommendations regarding the TLC³ Program, including:
 - increased education with parents, including topics such as child development, parenting, child - parent interaction and other issues;
 - increased amount of time that MLTC TLC³ staff spend in the communities;
 - ongoing resources to continue the TLC³ Program in the future;
 - more workshops and other training opportunities for child care staff.

Parent Feedback:

- Parents felt that the major impacts of TLC³ on children were:
 - improved social skills and ability to get along with others;
 - improved ability to learn;
 - improved communication and language skills;
 - improved willingness to/interest in/ability to read books and stories.
- Parents felt that the TLC³ Program had increased their knowledge of child development and how children learn and had contributed to improvements in their own parenting skills. Parents also felt that TLC³ had resulted in more interaction with their child, including such activities as counting, singing, reading and active listening and that they were spending more time together doing activities such as story time and bath time. They felt they were more attentive and sensitive to their children as a result of TLC³.
- Parents felt that the best things about TLC³ were its intentional, structured learning environment, the opportunities it provided for positive socialization, developing improved social behaviour and interaction with other children and adults, the opportunity to improve communication and language skills such as talking, speaking, listening and the opportunities TLC³ provided to develop an interest in books.
- Almost all parents recommended that the TLC³ Program continue. Specific recommendations regarding changes to the Program were:
 - more parental involvement in the Centres;
 - more contacts with parents in general;
 - regular reporting to parents regarding their children's progress.

Learnings and Conclusions

The Meadow Lake Tribal Council was honoured to be chosen as one of the host sites for the TLC³ Project. The Project has provided many benefits to MLTC's Child Care Program

during its formative developmental period. It has also provided many challenges which have been equally valuable in providing the stimulus for positive growth and development. The following is a summary of the key learnings, conclusions, themes and challenges that have resulted from the TLC³'s experience at MLTC.

- One of the greatest strengths of TLC³ was its open, flexible structure. The project allowed each site to respond to their own needs and priorities in a flexible responsive manner. TLC³ was readily integrated with existing MLFN and MLTC early childhood programs. Within this open flexible structure, it was also very easy to bring together staff with a number of different backgrounds and talents, including speech and language, business, education and psychology, to work within the TLC³ Program's boundaries.
- The discrete prepackaged programs used by TLC³ worked well. The programs proved to be well-designed and well-defined yet flexible. All of the programs worked well in a context of low adult literacy, proved to be culturally acceptable, were high in visual components and low in professional and technical jargon and were presented in a straightforward and simple lesson plan format that required minimal front-end instruction and was easy to grasp by the child care workers who were using the programs. The use of these well-defined programs also proved to be particularly effective in the highly formative developmental context of the MLFN's child care programs. The training programs provided a solid stable reference point as well as visibility and focus on the four main areas of early childhood development targeted by TLC³.
- The concept of integrating TLC³ within existing child care programs and emphasising specific quality enhancements worked extremely well. While TLC³ was designed to be an add-on to the main foundational child care program, in many instances, it did in fact provide a core program-like reference point for several of the centres. This enhancement approach was non-intrusive and non-threatening to the existing structure, authority and operations of the MLTC child care programs.
- This integration approach, particularly because it focussed on training and skill development of local child care staff, also proved to be respectful and supportive of MLTC's philosophy of developing community capacity to plan and operate health and social programs within their own communities. TLC³ was never promoted as a top-down, stand-alone program.
- There were clearly insufficient resources available to MLTC TLC³ staff to support all nine centres/programs in the eight participating MLFN communities. Attempting to respond to the needs and requests of all nine centres proved to be exhausting to TLC³ staff.
- It is recommended that both pre-service and in-service training programs for ECE

should continue to be closely linked to overall social and community development. It is further recommended that the facilitators of in-service training for the MLFNs' ECE workers be trained in the principles and techniques of adult learning and literacy development. It is also recommended that all in-service ECE training programs be high quality formal professional programs.

- One conclusion of the project is that working with parents should not be considered a casual secondary aspect of the program. Rather, working with parents should be a primary, professional aspect of the program. Parents are asking questions and need and deserve comprehensive quality information and advice. This interaction has to be seen to be professional to raise the overall status and importance of ECE in the eyes of parents. Parents should be seen as legitimate and equal partners in the education of their children.
- Based on the findings of this evaluation, it is also recommended that home visits be included as a core component of MLTC's child care and early learning programs. Home visits increase the status of parents within the learning context and enhance the ease with which knowledge is transferred between care providers and parents. Home visits should be supported by a clearly worded professional protocol regarding the conduct of such visits.
- The three most beneficial training sessions were felt to be the workshops supporting the *Come Read With Me* Program, the *It Takes Two to Talk* Program and the *Play is FUNdamental* Program. Child care staff identified ECE certification and training related to children with special needs and/or behavioural problems as the two major areas in which they wanted further training. The desire for further training among child care workers was substantial.
- TLC³ introduced and supported a broader definition of parenting education than the one that was predominant prior to the inception of the program. Under the latter view, parenting education was for those who were struggling with parenting and for remediating unacceptable parenting behaviours. TLC³ has successfully introduced the idea that any activity that encourages parents and children to spend time together doing activities such as reading, singing, talking, playing or story-telling will have positive benefits for both parents and children.
- TLC³ at MLTC found that various local factors and local site culture did influence both the receptiveness of the community for, and the effectiveness and quality of early learning programs in the communities. These factors included proximity to larger centres, the effects of traumatic community events, the degree to which communities have formally committed to, and articulated, a vision for young children in their communities, the degree to which communities take advantage of opportunities for training and resources for young people and other related factors.

- An unfortunate conclusion of the project is that the status of child care programs and child care staff continues to be low within the overall community status scale. Child care workers are not treated like professionals. TLC³ does appear to have contributed to some degree to an increase in the status and profile of young children in the minds of community members and leadership. However, young children and their advocates still do not have a strong voice in the communities at present.
- Comprehensive community directional and strategic plans regarding young children and their families in their communities may contribute to improved status and a stronger voice for these groups. Such plans would include a clear statement of purpose and vision and a clear statement of the rights of young children and their parents, identify comprehensive goals and objectives, outline specific programs, services and activities and identify the roles and responsibilities of parents, community leaders, service providers and the community-at-large.

Sustainability

- Many of the key aspects of TLC³ will continue within the child care centres including, most centrally, the core packaged programs which were very well-received by both MLTC and MLFN child care staff. Furthermore, the outcomes described in the MLTC TLC³ logic model, and the general orientation of the model itself, will continue to influence the direction and operation of MLTC's child care program. A staff position within the MLTC Child Care Program will be hired to work with all early learning programs. This position will provide services such as advocacy, program planning, advice and support to MLTC child care staff, quality assurance, training and other services related to the four basic areas of early childhood education and development that were targeted by TLC³, namely, language, cognition, social skills and literacy skills. MLTC's Child Care Program will continue to monitor the long-term outcomes of TLC³ by continuing the practice of interviewing parents and child care providers at the end of each year, completing evaluations of all training sessions, and using formal assessment tools where appropriate to monitor continuing development and growth and other means.