

## **Regina Early Learning Centre EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Program Description**

TLC<sup>3</sup> was sponsored by The Lawson Foundation and administered by The Hincks-Dellcrest Institute. The Early Learning Centre was one of seven centres across Canada selected to participate in this project.

Established in 1977, the Early Learning Centre (ELC) is a community based organization whose mission is to work cooperatively with low income families to provide programs which foster the healthy development of children from birth to five years of age. Funding from TLC<sup>3</sup>, a five year project which began in 1997, made possible the addition of PAT (Parents as Teachers) a home visiting program geared to families with children under the age of three, the addition of the family literacy programs Come Read With Me and PRINTS (Parents' Roles Interacting with Teachers, Fagan and Cronin, 1998) to the Family Outreach program, and an augmentation of the already existing Preschool program. The augmentation of the Preschool program included:

- an increased focus on cognitive and language development through the implementation of High Scope strategies, the Reggio Emilia approach, and more time from the speech language pathologist
- enhanced child assessment practices through the adoption of PES (Preschool Evaluation Scale, McCarney, 1984) and further refinement of portfolio documentation
- an increase in staff skills through ongoing professional development
- the institution of regular parent-staff supper meetings which include an educational component

A fourth program area, Family Support (in-home support such as life and home management skills for families facing critical issues), was not directly affected by TLC<sup>3</sup>.

### **ELC Population Description**

All children participating in ELC programs were born in Canada and spoke English; over three quarters of children (84%) had at least one parent of First Nations ancestry. Challenges faced by children participating in the preschool program included behavioural issues (14%), neglect (14%), physical, emotional, or sexual abuse (6%), a diagnosis for developmental issues (3%), and some time spent in foster care (11%).

The largest proportion of children's families was headed by a single parent (45%, compared to 17% for all of Regina in 1996). Their families were mobile: a third of families indicated they had lived for less than a year at their current residence. As expected, household income was low, with 74% reporting an annual income less than \$20,000 (the average household income for all Regina in 1995 was \$48,206). The main source of income for most households (55%) was Social Assistance or Child Tax Benefit, followed by wages or salaries (26%), with educational funding and other sources making up the rest.

A sizeable proportion of mothers were young; 44% were 19 years old or younger when their first child was born (compared to 11% of women giving birth in Regina in 2000). Parents'

education status was low; only 21% of mothers and 16% of fathers had some post secondary training (compared to 54% of people in Regina in 1996).

## **Summary of Evaluation Findings**

The evaluation was conducted as part of the TLC<sup>3</sup> project and was carried out over the final three years of the project, 1999-2002. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to answer the evaluation questions. A summary of findings from each of the methods used follows.

### ***PAT (Parents as Teachers) records***

PAT records indicate the parent educators were very proactive in identifying issues, providing support, and suggesting further steps for encouraging children's development. Records also indicate positive effects on parents (such as an increase in parenting skills) and children (such as improvement in speech).

### ***PES (Preschool Evaluation Scale, McCarney 1994)***

Results of PES scores for ELC preschool children were positive for all three areas reviewed: cognitive thinking, expressive language, and social emotional development. The standardization of these scores means that changes were less likely to be due to children's maturation process and more likely due to the ELC preschool program. Specific findings included the following:

- In all three areas the number of children with delays decreased between the time they started the preschool program and the time they finished. In addition, a number of children who started with a severe delay improved to a moderate delay.
- A higher proportion of children had cognitive thinking delays than had expressive language or social emotional delays at both start and end of children's time in the program.
- Children with cognitive thinking delays were least likely to move up one or more levels. Children with severe or moderate social emotional delays (the lowest proportion of the three areas at beginning and end) were most likely to move up one or more levels.
- Looking at the numbers by year rather than by child, results remained positive. At the end of each year for each area, the proportion of children with delays had decreased and the number of children with no delays had increased.
- The middle year for cognitive thinking and expressive language areas showed the least amount of change (there were only two years of data for social emotional rather than three); it appears likely that this second year dip was because of the higher proportion of children with delays starting the second year (2000-2001) with issues such as behaviour problems, developmental diagnoses, abuse, neglect, and having been in foster care.
- Two associations between children's change to another level and other variables were positive and statistically significant: as parents' level of education increased the likelihood of positive expressive language change increased, and there was less likelihood of positive cognitive thinking change when the child had experienced abuse or neglect.

### ***Portfolios***

Portfolio analysis confirms PES findings. The portfolios of 16 children (who appear to be representative of the other preschool children) were analyzed and showed improvements in the following areas:

- **cognitive development.** Children increased their drawing abilities and knowledge of body parts, knowledge of colours, knowledge of numbers, and literacy/writing skills.

- **language development.** Children improved their syntax, measured in this case by number of words and morphemes per sentence (morphemes are the smallest unit of meaning), and their semantics (ability to express nuances of meaning). Children's use of pragmatics (using language with purpose) was evident from the beginning. At age 5, ELC preschool children's number of words spoken per sentence was, on average, very close to the standard level (6.5 words compared to 7).
- **social emotional development.** Children began saying "please" and "thank-you," became more extroverted (for example, more willing to answer a question in front of the class, perform in front of others, join others in dramatic play, and contribute their ideas), and learned how to take turns. In addition, noticeable improvements were observed among those with initial difficulty concentrating.
- **creativity.** Participation in and enthusiasm for creative activities such as art, music, and creative play increased during the year.
- **planning.** Children were more able as the year went on to explain coherently and with detail what they planned to do, and more able to follow through with their plans and verbally recall them.

***ECERS® (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998)***

ECERS® scores, used to rate the preschool environment (with respect to space and furnishings, personal care routines, language-reasoning, activities, interaction, program structure, and parents and staff), were very positive. For all three years, all categories received scores higher than 5 and many received a 7 (5 is considered "good" and 7 "excellent").

***Children's survey***

Children in the preschool program were asked what they liked about the program. The largest category of responses by far was play; and arts and crafts was the second largest category. There were a few mentions of language related, social, and other activities.

***Case studies***

The case studies of five children who participated in the preschool program illustrated the range of strengths children have to draw on and the range of challenges they have to face. All five children selected for the case studies demonstrated positive change in one or more areas; the nature of this change varied from child to child.

***Parent surveys***

Parent surveys and feedback forms indicated a high degree of satisfaction with all TLC<sup>3</sup>-related programs, and positive change as a result of program activities:

- **PAT.** Parents liked a number of things about PAT home visits, ranging from knowledge gained about developmental stages to the parent-child activities. Parents indicated they learned a number of things from home visits, for example they gained a better understanding of children's language development and that it's all right to play with your child. Most parents read the PAT handouts, found them useful, and tried to use the information. During the one year parents were surveyed that the Toy and Book Lending Library was operational, most parents indicated they had used it.
- **Preschool program.** Parents listed a number of changes occurring in children as a result of their participation in the preschool program, including social and emotional development (the most frequent response), increase in self esteem and self confidence, increase in

cognitive and language skills, and exposure to Aboriginal culture. Parents receiving regular home visits (most parents) liked the home visits because they were informative, and because they strengthened the home-preschool link.

- **Family Outreach.** (These results apply to Family Outreach programs in general, which include the TLC<sup>3</sup> family literacy programs.) Survey results confirm that provision of transportation and childcare was important to parents' participation in Family Outreach events. Parents liked Family Outreach activities because they: gained information, knowledge and skills; experienced fun, enjoyment, and relaxation; connected with others. Parents indicated they used a number of things they learned through the activities at home.
- **Come Read With Me.** Parents indicated that their participation in this program resulted in: knowledge increase and application of this knowledge at home, enjoyment, exposure to books from Aboriginal and other cultures, and in children an increased attention span and interest in books. Parents liked the hands on activities that were included in 2000-2001; they also liked the addition of Parent and Child Together Time (PACTT). PAT parents who attended the Come Read With Me session specifically for them found it helpful.
- **PRINTS.** Parents indicated that they used the activities they learned at PRINTS' sessions at home in a number of different ways. They also indicated that their participation in PRINTS increased their and their children's knowledge, changed the quantity and quality of parent-child interactions, and increased their children's enjoyment in learning and desire to learn.

### ***Key informant interviews***

A summary of points raised by one or more key informants (some internal and some external to ELC) follow:

- **conditions in the external environment.** Young children and their families are affected by complex issues such as poverty which ELC cannot change.
- **ELC in general and program specifics.** ELC is doing an excellent job with limited resources. There would be a gap if ELC didn't exist. Its programs have many strengths.
- **staff.** ELC staff are extremely dedicated and caring. They continue to work at ELC, despite the low wages and heavy workload that result from a low level of funding. They feel they are making a positive contribution to children and their families, and they experience a sense of community at ELC.
- **relationship between ELC and parents.** There is a close relationship between ELC and parents. Parents are formally involved with ELC through the parent-controlled board, programs specifically for families, contact with teaching staff during home visits, parent-teacher supper meetings, and visiting and participating in the classrooms. Parents are comfortable at the ELC because of the qualities exhibited by staff (such as being respectful and nonjudgemental), program qualities and supports (such as use of an adult education approach, ongoing evaluation and the provision of transportation, childcare and food), the ELC environment, and parent familiarity with ELC.
- **community profile and links.** The ELC is highly respected locally and nationally. For example, ELC received the Canada Post Literacy Award. In addition, ELC is well integrated into the network of community organizations in a variety of ways ranging from participation on inter-agency committees to working relationships with a number of organizations such as Four Directions Health Centre, Child and Youth Services, SIAST, and Public and Catholic School Boards.
- **funding.** Lack of stable, ongoing funding at an adequate level is a critical issue for ELC.

- **continuous improvement.** ELC exemplifies the term “continuous improvement” through its practice of ongoing learning and reflection, receptiveness to new ideas and innovation, and constructive problem solving approach.
- **impacts.** There were a number of different impacts at a number of different levels:
  - TLC<sup>3</sup> contributed to ELC ranging from the addition of new programs and new program strategies to more staff and parent training and skill development.
  - ELC activities benefit all children, but in different ways (for example, in improved language, cognitive, and social skills), depending on the child and their particular issues.
  - ELC impacts on parents include an increase in parenting knowledge and skills, a positive change in attitude to education and greater involvement in children’s and their own education, increased empowerment, increase in social supports, and access to concrete supports.
  - ELC impacts on the broader community include dissemination of knowledge and expertise, providing a model for other organizations, coordination with other initiatives, and parents with increased skills who go on to participate in other organizations.
- **Advice for others.** Key informants made a number of suggestions which could serve as recommendations for people working in the area of early childhood development. These recommendations or “fundamentals” of good practice covered the following areas: fundamental theories and beliefs, fundamentals of program implementation, fundamentals for relationships, fundamentals of working with different groups.

### ***Best practices check-in***

ELC teaching staff’s review of processes and activities indicates a strong consistency between their practice and underpinnings/understanding of the environment. (Underpinnings include values, goals, ethics, theories, underlying beliefs, and evidence. Understanding of the environment includes vision and analysis for the organization and for the issue of healthy development.)

## **Discussion of Evaluation Findings**

### ***TLC<sup>3</sup> objectives***

All of ELC’s general TLC<sup>3</sup> objectives were met. In addition, the results of the evaluation (for the time period 1999-2002) indicate that, as far as can be told given available data, short term objectives for TLC<sup>3</sup> components were also met:

- **PAT.** PAT addressed children’s developmental needs and capacities through ongoing screening, referrals to community resources, and identification of strategies for parents to use with their children. Children participating in PAT were prepared for a smooth transition into ELC’s preschool program. Parent survey responses indicate that they increased their knowledge and understanding of children’s developmental stages, and of activities they could do with children to support their child’s development.
- **Preschool.** Evidence is strong that the preschool program assisted children with cognitive and language delays to increase their skill levels. In addition, findings indicate that all children improved in at least some ways. Child assessment practices were enhanced through use of PES, refining of portfolio documentation, and ongoing professional development. The program also facilitated children’s entrance into the school system, first by increasing children’s developmental levels, and second through its transition strategy.

- **Family Literacy.** Parent responses on Come Read With Me and PRINTS evaluation forms indicate that parents successfully applied the knowledge they learned from the two programs in terms of participating in specific literacy activities with their children and in general interactions with their children. The knowledge gained concerned the importance of language and literature, the value of play, and specific literacy activities to engage in with their children.

### **Overall impact**

The TLC<sup>3</sup> project was responsible for a number of positive impacts:

- **impact on ELC in general.** In addition to the impact of the TLC<sup>3</sup> project on ELC programming (see earlier section *program description*), TLC<sup>3</sup> impacted positively on the organization as a whole through an increase in:
  - credibility
  - networking opportunities
  - financial stability
  - focus on accountability and evaluation issues
- **impact on children.** The TLC<sup>3</sup> PAT program may have resulted in at least some children being better able to meet their potential through screening, referrals, and suggested strategies for parents, and in ensuring that at least some PAT children were well prepared for preschool. TLC<sup>3</sup> provided very necessary support to the preschool program's processes, activities and general strategies, almost certainly increasing impact on children, in particular the positive findings that children with cognitive thinking and expressive language delays increased their levels, many of them ending their stay in the preschool program with no delays, and that preschool children in general were better prepared for kindergarten.
- **impact on parents.** Impacts on parents directly attributable to TLC<sup>3</sup> program components included an increase in knowledge through PAT and Family Literacy programs, and application of that knowledge (at least in the case of Family Literacy). TLC<sup>3</sup> in combination with ELC impacted on parents in these ways:
  - general increase in parenting knowledge and skills
  - a change to a positive attitude towards education
  - increased confidence
  - increased social support and feeling of belonging
- **impact on community.** TLC<sup>3</sup> in combination with general ELC activities had a positive impact on the community:
  - increased awareness concerning early childhood development and related issues
  - provision of an effective model for other organizations to follow
  - a role in the continuum of integrated services
  - contribution of ELC parents with enhanced skills to other organizations

There were no identified negative impacts, other than the "growing pains" that occur with the introduction of new program components and change in practice. At the same time, all positive impacts were expected and intended. To summarize, major (short term) impacts (other than those on programming and the organization as a whole) included:

- increase in identification of challenges affecting children, and a decrease in number of children with cognitive and language delays between the time children started and ended the preschool program

- increase in parents' parenting knowledge, literacy awareness and application, confidence, and social support, and a change in attitude to education and participation in education
- increase in community awareness and continued provision of services which complement other community services

## **Key themes/lessons**

Four major lessons were learned through implementing TLC<sup>3</sup>:

- continuous improvement, in the form of ongoing professional development, reflection, and modifications based on reflections, is essential to the success of a program
- a best practices approach, where practice is aligned with factors such as values, theories, beliefs, evidence and understanding of the environment, facilitates a program's all round effectiveness
- change is not easy; there is a cycle of initial resistance, then acceptance
- positive relationships are powerful and need to be nurtured

## **Overall Conclusion**

Evaluation findings were very positive. The major conclusion of this report is that TLC<sup>3</sup> program components directly and indirectly contributed to many benefits for children, parents and the community. ELC, by using an approach solidly based on continuous improvement, alignment of practice with values and other important factors, and good relationships at all levels, has produced excellent results through its implementation of the TLC<sup>3</sup> project.

These positive results have a number of implications for the Early Learning Centre, policy makers and the broader Saskatchewan community.

- First, they validate the work of the Regina Early Learning Centre and suggest the importance of the ELC securing a more adequate funding base which will allow the program to both continue to deliver existing programs. Ideally funding should also provide the ELC with future opportunities to continue to refine and expand upon its existing programs.
- Second, these results join a growing body of information which documents the effectiveness of early childhood programs and provide an illustration of a program within a Saskatchewan context.
- Third, the evaluation report presents findings which have the potential to provide valuable guidance and insight to other programs working within a uniquely Saskatchewan context.

## **Sustainability**

ELC defines sustainability in terms of adequate funding, appropriate skills and knowledge, and processes. At this point, all TLC<sup>3</sup> program components are sustainable with respect to:

- skills and knowledge: staff have consistently applied in their practice the skills and knowledge they gained through the training made possible by TLC<sup>3</sup>; these skills and knowledge will not be lost
- processes: staff have thoroughly integrated processes related to PAT, High Scope (plan-do-reflect in particular) and Reggio Emilia into their practice; these processes will be maintained (although improved as time goes on through ongoing reflection)

- funding: funding exists to continue for another year all TLC<sup>3</sup> program components (that is, PAT, preschool cognitive and language focus, parent-teacher supper meetings, and family literacy programs) and efforts are being made to secure funding beyond this point; regardless of funding, the cognitive and language focus will remain

This sustainability was achieved through a combination of many meetings and ongoing advocacy. The two major themes that characterize ELC's efforts to ensure sustainability are: the importance of community linkages and partnerships, and the necessity to constantly raise awareness concerning ELC and the issues it's trying to address. The challenge for ELC isn't that local funders aren't aware of or don't respect ELC; in general there is a lack of funding and priority for early childhood learning. However, ELC is continuing its work at the community level with the Early Childhood Network, Better Futures for Regina's Children, and KidsFirst, in order to make early childhood more of a priority.