

Steps

ECMap Newsletter

Early Child Development Mapping Project

Summer – May/June 2012



Teachers, school authorities weigh in on the EDI

Julie Piquette, a kindergarten teacher at École du Sommet in St. Paul, filled out her first EDI — Early Development Instrument — questionnaires this spring.

It took her about an hour, longer than the 20 minutes allotted, to complete each questionnaire, one for every student. Each one contains 103 questions which cover five areas of early development. Can the student climb stairs by himself? Is he eager to try out a new game or toy? Can she throw a ball and hold a pencil or crayon? Does she get along with other children? Piquette took extra time to answer all the questions because she wanted to make sure that she was completing the forms as thoroughly and accurately as possible.

Piquette is among the more than 1,500 kindergarten teachers who have gathered EDI

information in Alberta over the past three years as part of Alberta Education's Early Child Development Mapping Initiative. By 2014, EDI results will have been gathered for about 90,000 kindergarten children in Alberta. The success of the provincewide Initiative depends a great deal on the contribution made by teachers in EDI data collection — on their judgment and powers of observation in filling out questionnaires on their students and on their ability to get parents to sign consent forms to allow their children to be included.

Piquette says that the EDI questionnaires gave her a better idea of how her students were doing. Although the EDI serves as a group, or population-based, measure of early development and results on individual children are not reported, kindergarten

teachers, like Piquette, say that completing the questionnaires gives them invaluable insights into the developmental progress of their students.

The Francophone elementary school teacher also feels that she has made a worthwhile contribution to an important goal. "The point of all this is to have good information on how children are developing across the province at a critical point in their lives," she says. "The proper resources can then be allocated where they are needed, so that children can develop well and do well in school." Piquette notes that the parental consent rate in her school was 100 per cent, higher than the provincial average of 87.5 per cent.

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we engage

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Kindergarten teacher Julie Piquette with student Emrick Marien at École du Sommet in St. Paul

EDI brings unexpected benefits and policy and program changes

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Heather Raymond, director of Inclusive Learning and EDI coordinator, Edmonton Public Schools

When you ask teachers what they think about the EDI and the results that are beginning to emerge in Alberta, many of them respond as follows: "The research is finally catching up with what we've known all along!"

That's what kindergarten teachers tell Michelle MacKinnon, early learning and EDI coordinator for the Holy Spirit Catholic School District. "Teachers are excited about the potential impact of the EDI data on policy and children's early experiences before they start school," says MacKinnon.

The southern Alberta school district has already noticed that children who attend the district's preschool program for three to four year-olds are doing better on EDI results. It is now looking at how to strengthen the program to address deficits and improve results, she says.

The first EDI results are viewed with keen interest by Lethbridge Public School District #51, as well. The district has completed its second round of data collection in March. "We're finding some surprising results," says Ingrid Morden, early childhood services consultant, referring to first-round of results that have been analyzed and reported. "The basic assumption is that socio-economic status determines early development and school readiness, but we're finding that this is not necessarily the case."

Working with the EDI has encouraged kindergarten teachers to take a more wholistic approach to early development, says Morden. "It's got them looking at their children with a new set of eyes. They're going beyond academic development and looking at skill levels in all

areas of development, including gross motor skills and social competence." These areas lay the foundation for more complex development, but are often overlooked.

EDI training and implementation has brought other unexpected benefits. In rural areas, kindergarten teachers find the opportunities for professional networking and development particularly helpful. They often work in isolation from each other and welcome the chance to get together and share professionally, says Tracy Moncrief-Smith, a teacher and EDI coordinator for Buffalo Trail Public Schools.

The EDI provides teachers with practical information that they can use in their classroom instruction and work with individual students. "It really reinforces the importance of all the areas



Karri-Lynn Knudsen, kindergarten teacher at Eckville Elementary School, with students, Ava Hallgren (left) and Mikaela Hebb

EDI quick facts

- Is a population-based tool to measure the development of kindergarten children.
- Looks at five areas of development: social competence, language and thinking skills, physical health and well-being, emotional maturity and communication skills and general knowledge.
- In Alberta, nearly 27 per cent of kindergarten children experience great difficulty in one or more areas of development. In Canada, it's 25 per cent.

For more information, please go to www.ecmap.ca

of development," says Karri-Lynn Knudsen, a kindergarten teacher at Eckville Elementary School. "I keep the five domains in the foreground when I'm doing my lesson planning."

Completing the EDI early in March helps prepare teachers for filling out report cards later in the month. It also enables them to address developmental weaknesses and provide students with additional support they may need and request remedial help.

EDI findings have already sparked program changes in a number of school boards. Edmonton Public Schools, for example, responded to EDI results from a 2005 pilot project that preceded the provincial Initiative. The school board partnered with Clareview Head Start to offer a preschool program to meet needs that were identified in ethnically diverse Bannerman, a northeast Edmonton neighbourhood. It also introduced more preschool programming, along with ABC Head Start, in Lymburn, a well-off suburban neighbourhood in southwest Edmonton where the EDI indicated high levels of vulnerability.

Fifty per cent of kindergarten children in Edmonton do not attend their neighbourhood school because of the school district's open boundary policy, notes Heather Raymond, director of Inclusive Learning and EDI coordinator for Edmonton Public Schools. But EDI results (which are reported for communities and are tied to where children live) still provide the school board and school principals with a good picture of local trends.

Following the pilot, the public school board participated in another round of the EDI in 2009 and is preparing for EDI data collection again in the spring of 2013. It is also anticipating the release of the first Edmonton wide EDI data in May. "We want to know where our kids are coming in, so that we can put policies and programs in place to help us move forward," says Raymond. "We have a stake in seeing that children meet developmental benchmarks so that they are able to take full advantage of the learning that schools offer."

Community coalitions



Parents, educators, coalition builders: A powerhouse combination

Lisa Day became chair of the Athabasca and Area Early Child Development Coalition "by accident."

"I thought that I would call everyone together and then step back," says Day, who is a kindergarten teacher at Whispering Hills Primary School in Athabasca and the mother of five boys, aged two to 13.

Day first heard about ECMAP when she was volunteering at the school's literacy and numeracy program. She was taking time off from teaching to spend time with her youngest son, Quinn. As a mother and teacher, she was already well aware of the importance of the early years. After talking with ECMAP's community development coordinator for the area, she began making phone calls. "I didn't realize what it would lead to," she says with a laugh.

The new coalition got off to a shaky start as different people showed up for meetings. The school's principal and vice-principal were very supportive, however, and Baby Quinn came along for the ride, toddling around the school staff room where meetings were usually held. It took a while for people to grasp the idea of a community-based approach to early development.

Gradually the message got through and the group coalesced around a core of 10 to 12 members. Common goals were identified, information was sent out to people who were interested but unable to attend meetings and "point people" were identified in outlying rural communities. A series of open houses were planned to share the first community EDI results, released in May.

"The EDI gives us a starting point as community, so that we know what areas we need to focus on," says Day. "Our goal as a coalition is to make sure that our children have access to a wide range of developmental opportunities, so that they'll do well in school and beyond."

Does she have any regrets about "accidentally" taking on the job of coalition chair now that she's teaching full time again and juggling the demands of an active, large family?

"I consider myself fortunate to be working with a very dedicated, passionate group that



Lisa Day reads to her kindergarten class at Whispering Hills Primary School in Athabasca.

really believes in getting children off to a good start," she says without hesitation. "It's been a great group effort."

Day's experience is unique in the way that every community story is different, but it's also refreshingly common. Kindergarten teachers and EDI coordinators, as well as principals and school board officials, are playing an instrumental role in many early childhood development (ECD) coalitions across Alberta.

Shawna Jenkins is a literacy and early learning consultant for Elk Island Public Schools. She's also the EDI coordinator for the district, lives in Sherwood Park, east of Edmonton, has a five-year-old daughter and is active on her local coalition, the Strathcona County Early Childhood Development Local Coordinating Committee. The community received its first EDI results in November 2011.

"It's been really exciting to watch more and more people come on board and see changes beginning to happen," she says. "The concept of supporting the whole child



Shawna Jenkins with Kendra Arndt at Wye Elementary School in Sherwood Park

and every aspect of development is becoming embedded not only in classroom programs, but also in community programs such as those offered by parks and recreation and libraries. There is a growing awareness that everyone has a responsibility to support children, not just parents. This is about doing something with the data and bringing communities together with a common focus to ensure the best possible future for our children."

Profiles

Building on what communities care about

Valary Howard takes a low-key approach in working with communities in her east-central Alberta zone. She may join the group of moms who regularly meet with their young children in the Smoky Lake Municipal Library Wednesday mornings for a coffee and chat. Or she may drop into the Farmers' Corner Market Tea Room in Two Hills to find out what's going on and what people are talking about.

"I try to see what people are interested in and follow up on that," says Howard. "I like to pick up on the ideas that I hear in conversations and link them to the Project (ECMap) and the early years."

Her years as an adult educator have taught her the importance of building upon what people already know and care about. "I see my role as integrating people's awareness and interests into the Project."

Howard began her teaching career in St. Paul, where she taught English in high school and then at the Blue Quills First Nations College. St. Paul is one of the communities in Zone 8, which also encompasses Lac La Biche, Athabasca, Cold Lake, Bonnyville, Elk Point, Bruderheim, Lamont, Mundare and Waskatenau.

"Diverse," is how she describes the communities in her zone — a rich multicultural region that includes Métis settlements and First Nations, as well as Francophones, Germans, Ukrainians, Chinese, Lebanese and Mennonites, among others. "Every community is so different. Each one has its own nature. In every community, people respond to the Project differently."

The local school is often the hub and the heart of the community, says Howard. In many small communities, keeping the local school open has become synonymous with the struggle for survival. Having schools come on board with the Project is tremendously helpful. "When schools host meetings, for example, there is a potential for sustainability because of the infrastructure that is already in place."

Libraries also serve as community centres and their support can be crucial. Town councils have been helpful as well. Wherever she meets people, whether it's in council chambers or the local coffee shop, in groups or one-on-one, Howard asks: "Who else needs to be here? Who else should be invited? Do you have a friend or a neighbour who may be interested?"

Valary Howard can be reached by phone at 780-920-4829 or e-mail valary@ualberta.ca



Valary Howard is ECMap's community development coordinator for Zone 8.

FYI

The ECMap Project team is presenting a poster workshop at the **2012 Biennial Meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (ISSBD)**, which will be held July 8 to 12 in Edmonton. The workshop, *Interpreting Results of an Early Childhood Development Population Study: Mapping New Interdisciplinary Approaches to Culture, Context and Community*, will be chaired by ECMap director, Dr. Sue Lynch. The workshop will enable ECMap to share its preliminary research results on early childhood development in Alberta with researchers and scholars from around the world.

The conference is hosted by the University of Alberta and will be held at the Shaw Conference Centre.

For further information, please go to <http://www.issbd2012.com/index.html>

Contact us

The Early Child Development Mapping Project (ECMap) is part of the Early Child Development Mapping Initiative, which is funded by Alberta Education. ECMap is led by the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families (CUP), Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta.

For further information, please go to www.ecmap.ca

You may also contact us at ecmap@extn.ualberta.ca
780-248-1574

ECMap
Community-University Partnership
Faculty of Extension, University
of Alberta
2-410 Enterprise Square
10230 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4P6

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Mapping a bright future for Alberta's young children