

What the EDI is (not) – and Why it is Important for British Columbia: An Open Letter to the Early Childhood Educators

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In recent years kindergarten teachers in British Columbia have been filling in a form called the EDI for the children in their classrooms. The EDI – or Early Development Instrument – has now been used in all school districts in British Columbia and like many innovations in early childhood education its arrival has been greeted positively by many but with some suspicion and confusion by others. In this article we hope to dispel some of the misinformation that has caused this confusion and to explain why we think the EDI provides British Columbians with a useful tool for reflecting on and planning for the services that we as a province are providing to young children both before and after they enter school.

What the EDI is NOT:

- The EDI is ***not*** a screening tool that is intended to identify children with special needs
- The EDI does ***not*** diagnose children with specific learning disabilities or areas of developmental delay.
- The EDI does ***not*** recommend which children should be placed in special education categories or who should receive extra classroom assistance or whether children should be held back in kindergarten.
- The EDI does ***not*** recommend specific teaching approaches that should be used with individual children.
- The EDI is most certainly ***not*** a measure of the success or failure of preschool early childhood or child care experiences.
- The EDI is ***not*** used to design “curriculum” for early childhood education programs.
- In short, the EDI does ***not*** screen, identify, or diagnose individual children simply because it was never designed to be used for those purposes in the first place.

What the EDI IS

The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is a 120-item questionnaire filled out by Kindergarten teachers on all the children in their class. Information collected using the EDI is analyzed at a ***group*** level (for a school or a neighbourhood, for example) and is not used as a diagnostic tool for individual children. The kindergarten teacher uses the EDI to describe each child’s level of development in five areas:

- Physical Health and Well-Being
- Social Competence
- Emotional Maturity
- Language and Cognitive Development
- Communication Skills and General Knowledge

What do the EDI results tell us about ***groups*** of children?

The EDI gives us the average scores for groups of children and in this way can help to determine the number of developmentally “vulnerable children” in a city, community or neighborhood and the types of vulnerability they may be showing. We define “vulnerable children” as those in the bottom 10th percent of scores on any one of the EDI sub-scales. All information collected using the EDI is kept strictly confidential and used solely for statistical purposes. Identities of individual children are not revealed, and all data are kept strictly anonymous.

How are the EDI results used?

The EDI results are currently being used by many different in BC as a catalyst for the creation (or strengthening) of broad local coalitions that focus on the development of young children in their communities. In this way, the EDI has served to stimulate and facilitate discussion among teachers, parents, schools, government and community agencies on the early childhood program needs within their communities. EDI results have helped these stakeholders all over BC to reflect on early childhood programs in the community and to target funds and resources where they will be most useful. Janet Mort, a Ph.D. student at the University of Victoria, has recently completed a survey of the EDI implementation in the entire province and lists over 100 local collaborative projects. Some examples:

- The City of Abbotsford (School District 34) established an early years steering committee for the Understanding the Early Years Project in the summer of 2000 - prior to their 1st round of EDIs in the spring of 2001. In the spring of 2003, with Children First funding, the steering committee then transitioned to the Abbotsford Early Childhood Committee. The active 25 member committee has accomplished a great deal in the past 4 years including the publication of a "Family Resource Guide," which has assisted parents and caregivers, in the community, find services, and the formation of a Neighbourhood Places sub-committee, which opened sites in 3 schools this past September.

EDI results from 2003 were one of several criteria used in the selection of these sites.

- Discussions arising from the EDI results in School District 51 (Boundary) led the local Child and Youth Committee (CYC) to focus their attention on the nutrition needs of the children in their community. The community implemented a breakfast program in kindergarten programs and then broadened their focus to include dental, hearing and vision assessments.
- The local contact in School District 06 (Rocky Mountain) reported that they used the EDI results to prioritize programs for local funding. They also *"linked our speech pathology services for preschoolers with the school district speech pathology service and that has permitted us to provide a stronger service and maintain speech language pathologists financially"*.

But do we have to call it "readiness"?

We have learned that like many words, the term "*readiness*" means different things to different people. To some it is a meaningful way to describe the collection of cognitive and social skills, the knowledge, dispositions, and personal experiences that children bring with them when they enter kindergarten; and this rather bulky sentence is efficiently summarized in the term "*readiness*". For many of our partners in HELP - for example, school boards, teachers, parents and policy makers - the term "*readiness*" is descriptive, accurate, and neutral.

This places us in a quandary because for another set of important partners - early childhood educators, infant development consultants, and child care professionals - the word "*readiness*" carries a very strong negative association with it. This stems from a long-held set of beliefs in ECE that child development is a continuous process with no sharp dividing lines between "*not ready*" and "*ready*" and that children develop at different rates, especially in their early years. There is a concern that the term "*readiness*" might suggest that the *only* purpose of good ECE programs is to prepare children for a specific "endpoint" (school entry) when they are 5 years old, rather than providing exciting, stimulating and appropriate experiences and environments that children can appreciate

when they are 1, 2, 3 or 4 years old. (A 2-year old is a 2 year old and not just a future 5 year old). We are also hearing some concerns from early childhood educators that if or when groups of children are found to vulnerable on the EDI, early childhood educators may seem to be responsible for not making children “ready” for school.

These different perceptions of and associations with the word “readiness” are problematic for us because a major goal of the Human Early Learning Partnership is to provide research that can help in the creation of bridges of understanding and collaboration within communities and not to cause division and fragmentation. We realize, though, that these differences extend far beyond the use of the “R” word itself and reflect the fact that many different lenses and concepts are used by the many different professions that are involved with children of different ages and abilities. A “client” in one profession is a “student”, in another and a “patient” in another. A “baby” to some may be a “preemie”, a “neonate”, and “infant” or a “toddler” to others. There are numerous examples of language becoming an obstacle to collaboration instead of helping to communicate across different groups of professionals. One thing this teaches us is that for truly collaborative work to occur between professionals, researchers and academics we will all need to be patient, listen carefully and explain our own language and lenses to one another.

We want to assure our partners in Early Childhood Education that our use of the term “readiness” should not be taken as either a sign of disrespect or insensitivity to the field. We invite all of our partners to continue to work with us and with each other in our continuing attempt to make the language of early childhood development meaningful, accessible and respectful

And what’s this about an early childhood “curriculum”

We are also hearing concerns from people in ECE that in some communities the discussion on EDI results have led (non-ECE) people calling for or a more formal “curriculum” in preschool and child care programs in order to make children more “ready” for school. “Curriculum” is not a word we use in HELP and is certainly not one of the recommendations that we make. It seems to us that many who are not in the field of ECE do not yet understand that research has shown that play-based, child-focused, developmentally and culturally appropriate approaches to learning and development in the early years are the most successful programs both in short- and the long-term. As researchers at HELP we are currently supporting research on the impacts of high quality ECE programs and a number of ECE agencies are partnering with us in these efforts. To be clear: While this “C” word may arise out of some EDI-related discussions, it is most definitely not a word that HELP uses.

We want to reassure the ECE community that in the Human Early Learning Partnership we continue to value the contributions that Early Childhood Educators make in the lives of young children and we recognize their expertise in the challenging work that they do. In our community consultations around the province we will continue to meet with Early Childhood Educators so that we can discuss these and other concerns. HELP is currently supporting a number of ECE initiatives with a wide range of community groups and we’d be more than happy to discuss these initiatives and to explore new ones. Below are our e-mail addresses and we look forward to hearing from you and continuing our discussions.

For more information on the Human Early Learning Partnership please go to our website at www.earlylearning.ubc.ca. Hillel Goelman, Associate Director of HELP, can be contacted at hillel.goelman@ubc.ca and Clyde Hertzman, Director of HELP, can be contacted at clyde.hertzman@ubc.ca.