

TORONTO
FIRST
DUTY

Early Learning and Care
For Every Child

Informing Toronto's Best Start

Ten research questions and answers

Toronto First Duty

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In 2002 five school-community partnerships agreed to become Toronto First Duty (TFD) sites. They undertook to bring together the three early childhood streams of kindergarten, child care, and family supports into a seamless service. The goal was to create a 'single stop' where parents could access family supports and children could participate in a range of quality early learning and care activities.

The research findings for Toronto First Duty chart the changes, benefits and challenges at three levels: program, practices and policy; families and children; and, communities.

Academics from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto and from Ryerson University carried out the study. Principal researcher is Dr. Carl Corter, Atkinson Charitable Foundation Chair in Early Child Development and Education at the Institute of Child Study, OISE/UT.

The findings are based on data provided by assessments of program quality and child outcomes; parent, staff and community surveys, and an economic analysis. Input was also gathered from focus groups, interviews and the researchers' observations at the sites.

This Q & A highlights the findings for children, families and communities.

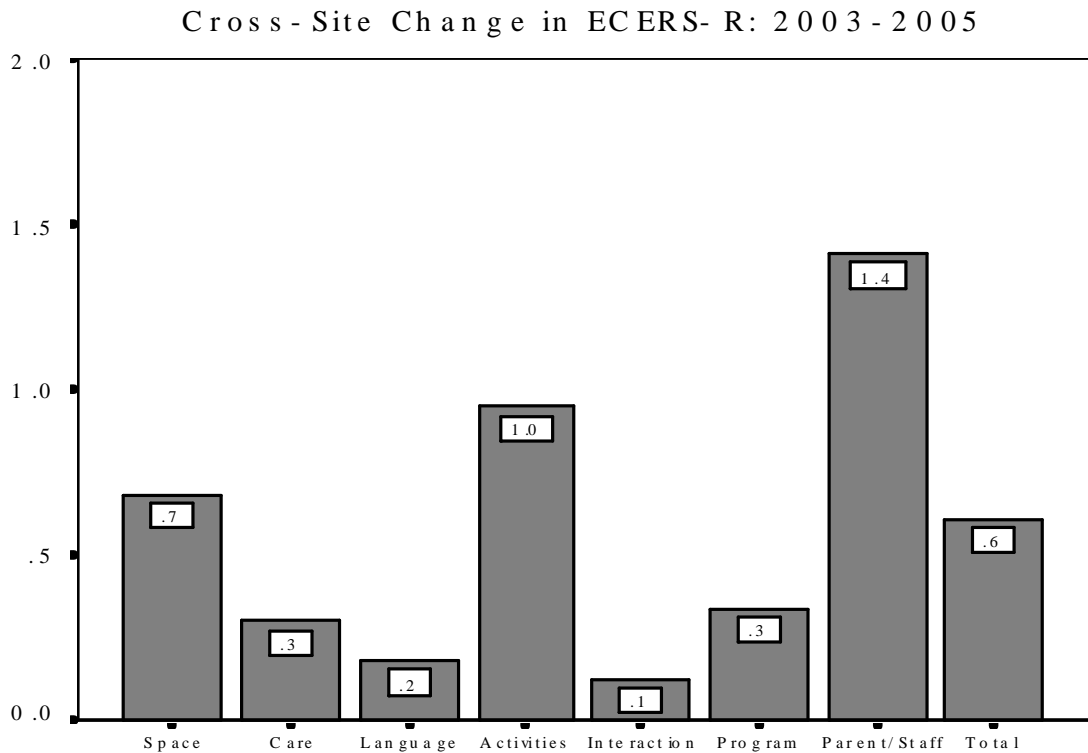
1. Does integration improve the quality of early childhood programs?

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised (ECERS-R) is used in Canada and internationally to assess quality in early childhood programs. It examines seven program areas: space and furnishings; personal care routines; language reasoning; program activities; staff-child interaction; program structure and parents and staff communication. Each area is graded using a 7 point scale from 1 – poor quality to 7 – meeting all the criteria for excellent early learning and care.

The sites were assessed twice by the researchers. In 2003 the kindergarten, child care and parenting programs showed pretty good quality, but there was room for improvement. By 2005 quality improvements were found in all seven areas, with the biggest advances made in use of space, program activities and parent/staff

communication. This can be explained in part by the sites' efforts to incorporate the Toronto First Duty goals that emphasize parent participation and using space in new ways to accommodate the integrated program.

The following graph illustrates the improvements in scores for all five TFD sites between the first quality assessment in 2003 and the second assessment in 2005.



2. Do early childhood professionals benefit from integration?

An integrated staff team comprised of kindergarten teachers, early childhood educators, family support workers, and other professionals who plan and deliver the program is a core feature of Toronto First Duty.

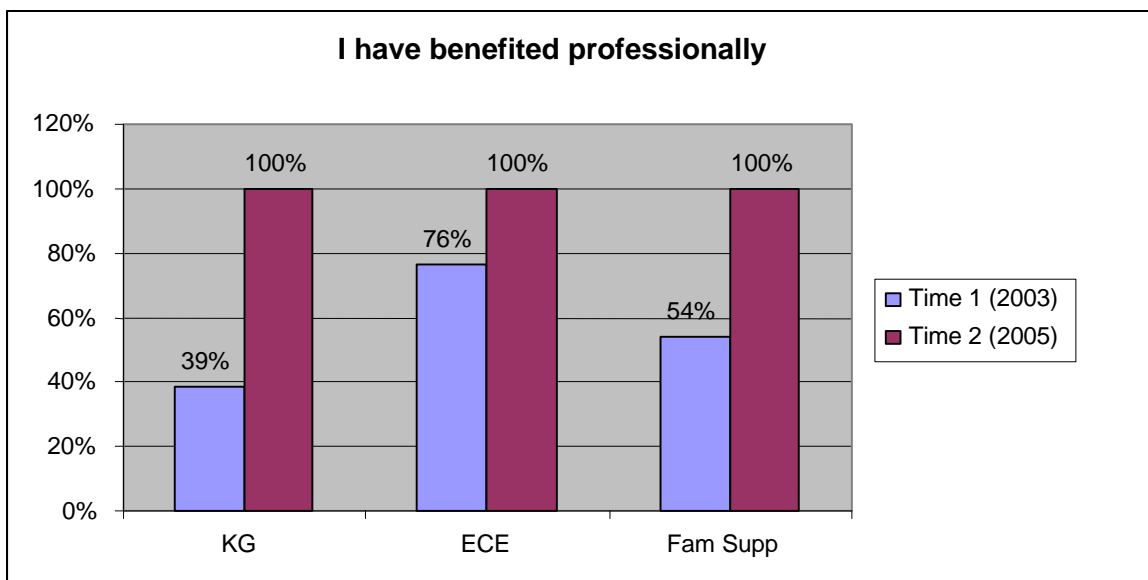
Key informant interviews and anonymous staff surveys captured the barriers and benefits to team building. Staff views of integration evolved over time. In its earliest stages, integration was a new concept for both professionals and administrators. The absence of clear direction and supports led to fears over the loss of professional identity. The considerable differences in compensation and working conditions among the team members contributed to an internal hierarchy. Improved leadership and support including the development of policies such as common behaviour

management protocols, joint professional development opportunities, program planning time and collective problem solving helped to build the teams.

Despite the struggles, the final staff survey in year four shows every kindergarten teacher, early childhood educator and family resource respondent “would like to see the TFD project continued at my school.” Team members also cited professional benefits from integration including: increased support from administrators and system managers; more access to program resources; better communication with families; enhanced professional development opportunities and peer learning and support.

The advantages of the integrated program for children played a big part in overcoming earlier reservations.

The following table shows the change in the staff views of the professional benefits of integration between 2003 and 2005.



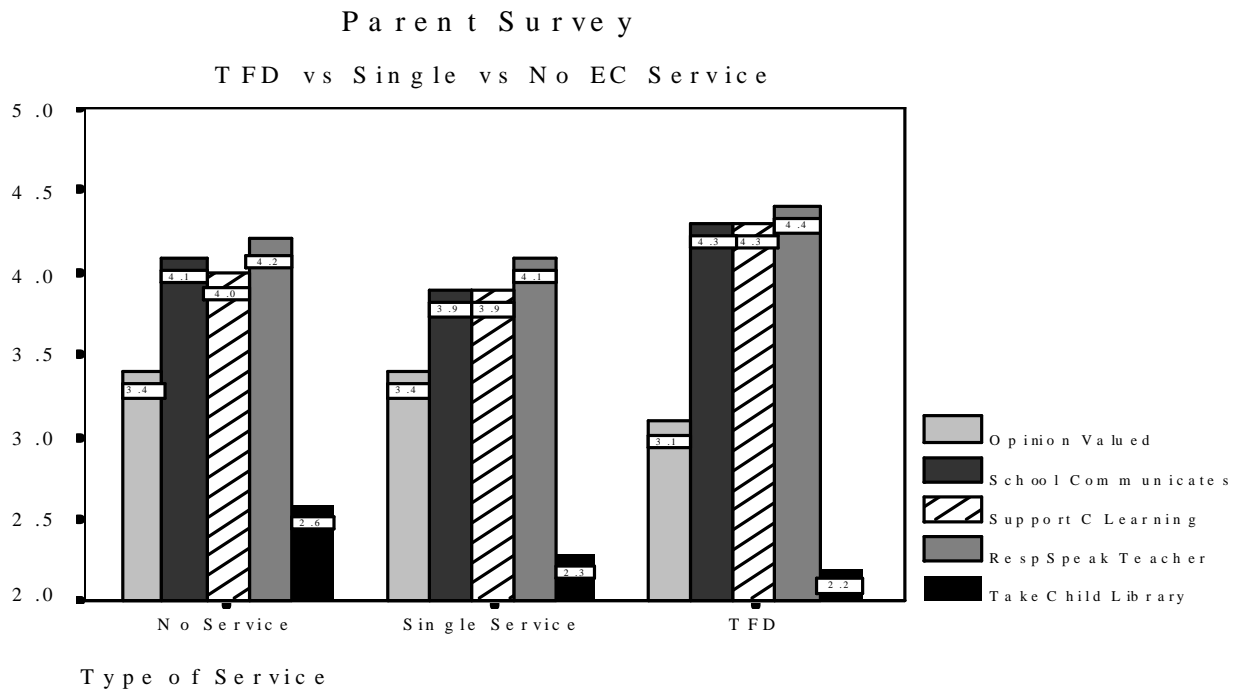
3. Does an integrated program help parents become involved in their children’s early learning?

Parent involvement is a core element of Toronto First Duty. There is a significant body of evidence indicating parent participation in their child’s education – reading to the child, overseeing school assignments, and meeting with staff to assess student progress -- is related to school success. To assess parent involvement, researchers surveyed a sample of parents of kindergarten-aged children in all five TFD sites. To

provide a comparison, parents were also surveyed in nearby schools where only kindergarten was offered, or kindergarten and either a parent child centre or family support program.

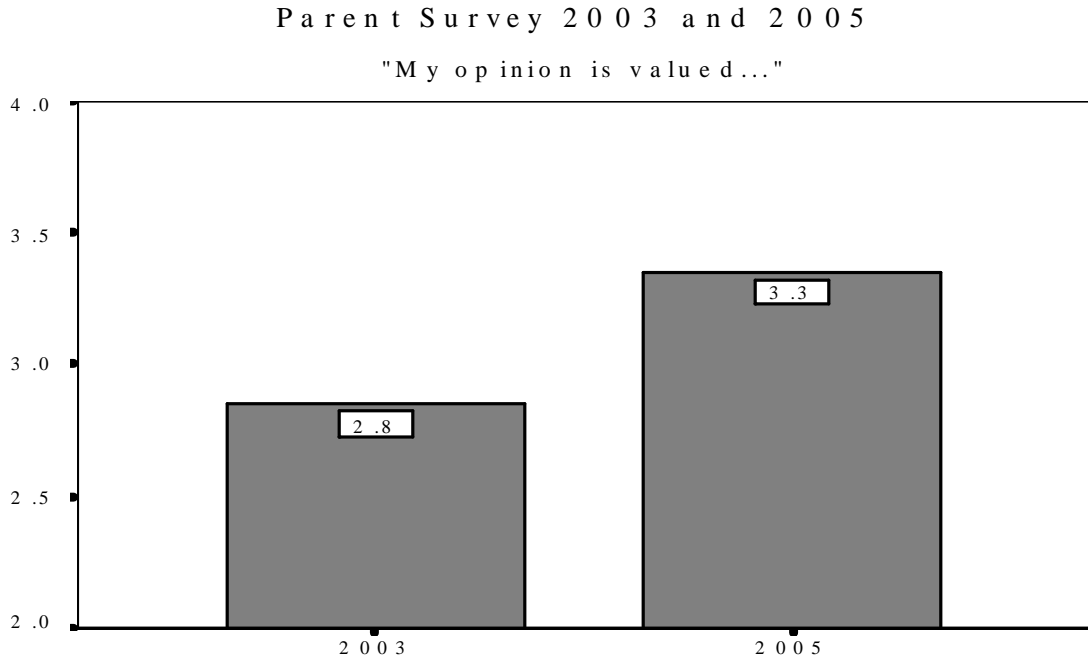
The comparisons of TFD parents with parents at schools with kindergarten only, or kindergarten and a family support service showed TFD parents were more likely to feel empowered to talk to their child’s kindergarten teacher and to help their child learn at home. This capacity building worked for parents who are new to Canada as well as for those born here.

TFD parents (and parents at schools with a family support program) also reported that they now made fewer trips to the library, because books and literacy activities were available at the school site. The following table illustrates these significant differences between parents at TFD sites and comparison sites with a single preschool service, or no preschool services.



Surveys also revealed parents’ desire for meaningful input into their child’s program. Initial findings during the start up phase indicated TFD parents were least likely to report that their opinions were valued by teachers and administrators. This may be explained in part by the inability of staff to meet the increased expectations for parent involvement championed by TFD. Efforts to correct the problem are reflected

by the 2005 survey where the parents sampled were more likely to report that their opinion is valued and that staff/teachers ask their opinion about programs and services, than those parents who were sampled in 2003. This difference is illustrated in the table below.

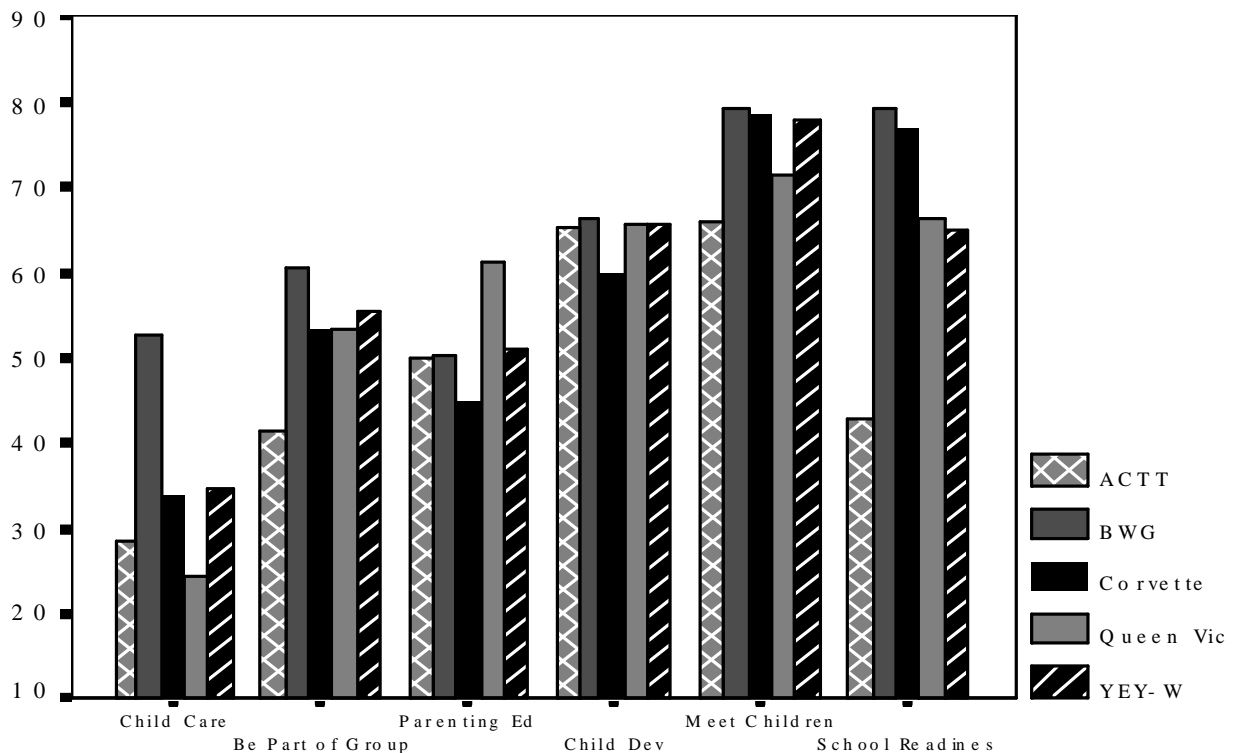


4. What do parents want from integrated early childhood programs?

At intake, parents were asked about their goals for their children and for themselves. Most parents had multiple goals in joining TFD. The following graph shows the percentages of parents who endorsed various goals for each of the five sites.

The graph also illustrates several other general points. First, there is variation in parents' goals across sites. For example, accessing childcare is of interest to 34% of parents enrolling in TFD at the Queen Victoria and to 52% of parents at the Bruce site. Second, goals for children generally outranked parents' goals for themselves. For example, socializing with other children and readiness for school outranked parents' interest in being part of a group or learning about parenting.

Parents' Program Goals by Site



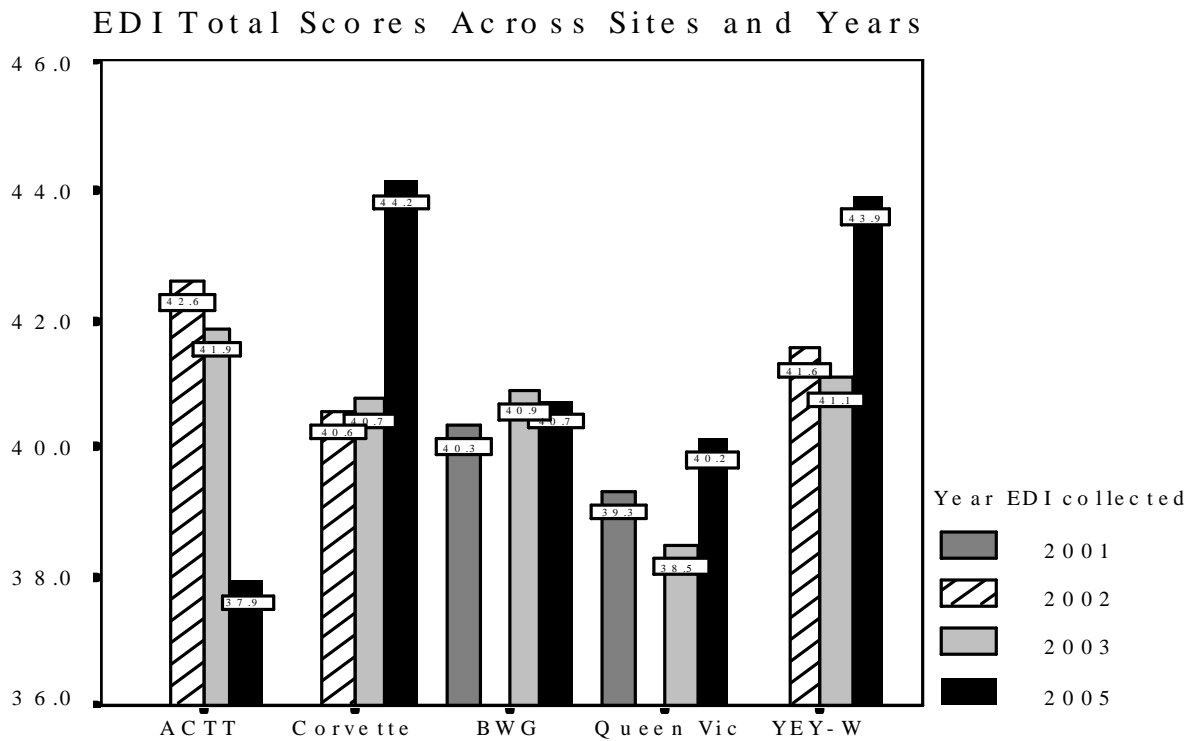
Nevertheless, it is clear that participating parents value the TFD multi-pronged aims of supporting child development and supporting parents, both in their roles as parent and in their needs for child care.

5. Does integrating services improve outcomes for children?

The first duty of TFD is to support the development of children. The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is a rating scale that kindergarten teachers complete for each child in their class. It is made up of over 100 items categorized into five domains. The EDI measures: physical health/well-being; social knowledge and competence; emotional health/maturity; language and cognitive development; and communication skills and general knowledge.

EDI scores can indicate changes in child development outcomes in a specific neighbourhood. Analysis of EDI scores in the TFD sites over “baseline” years (2001-2003) indicated that community-level data were stable, so that subsequent changes could indicate the influence of TFD. Data were collected for all sites early in the project and again in 2005. The table below shows total EDI scores across sites and

years. Total scores improved significantly in three of the five sites and were unchanged in two.

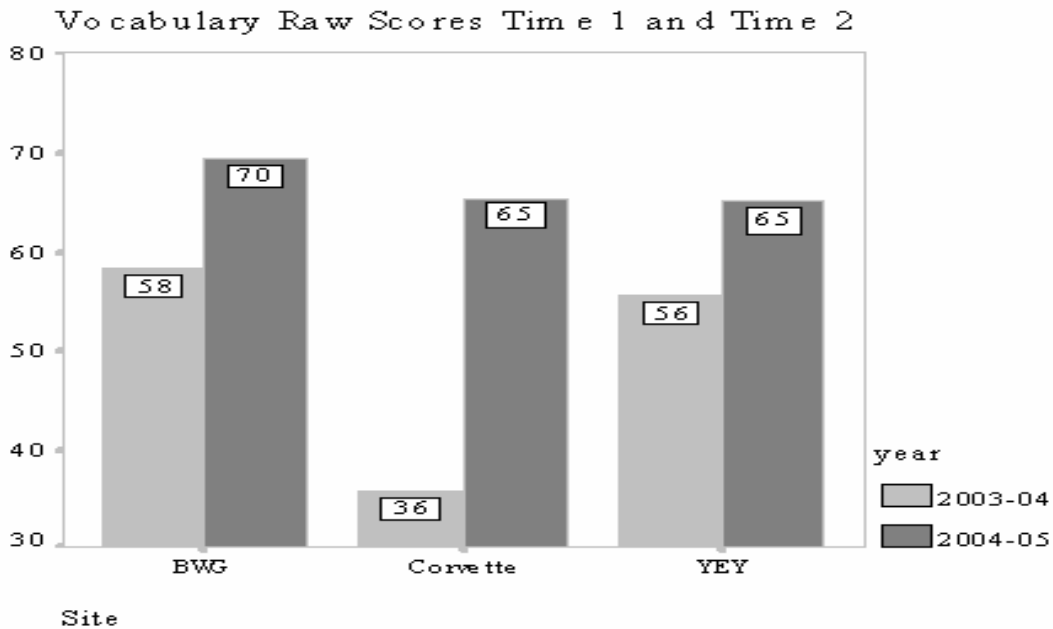


Total score is a blunt way of looking at child development; it is more informative to examine change within the five subscales. For all sites combined, significant improvements were seen in three of the five dimensions: social, emotional, and language. Changes were not seen in physical development or communication/general knowledge. Physical development was generally not a target in programming at the sites. Communication/general knowledge is strongly and negatively associated with minority language status; the fact that nearly 60% of the children in TFD programs have English as a second language may moderate improvements in this area.

The fact that improvement on the EDI was found in social-emotional and language development and that several sites had explicit aims for improvements in these areas suggest there may be causal connections between TFD programs and improved outcomes for child development.

During the spring of 2003 researchers also collected direct child measures on a sample of 76 children across the sites. Measures were repeated in the spring of 2005 with a sample of 125 children from three of the sites. The measures included the

Vocabulary-Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-III), Test of Early Reading Ability (TERA-III), Number Sense, and Social Understanding. Although the children tested were reflective of their community, the sample size is small. Nevertheless, the data tend to support the EDI findings: there were significant improvements across the three sites sampled in 2003 and 2005. Significant differences were found for language development (vocabulary), total TERA (measuring dimensions like print awareness and comprehension) and number knowledge. As an illustration, differences in the vocabulary scores are graphed below.

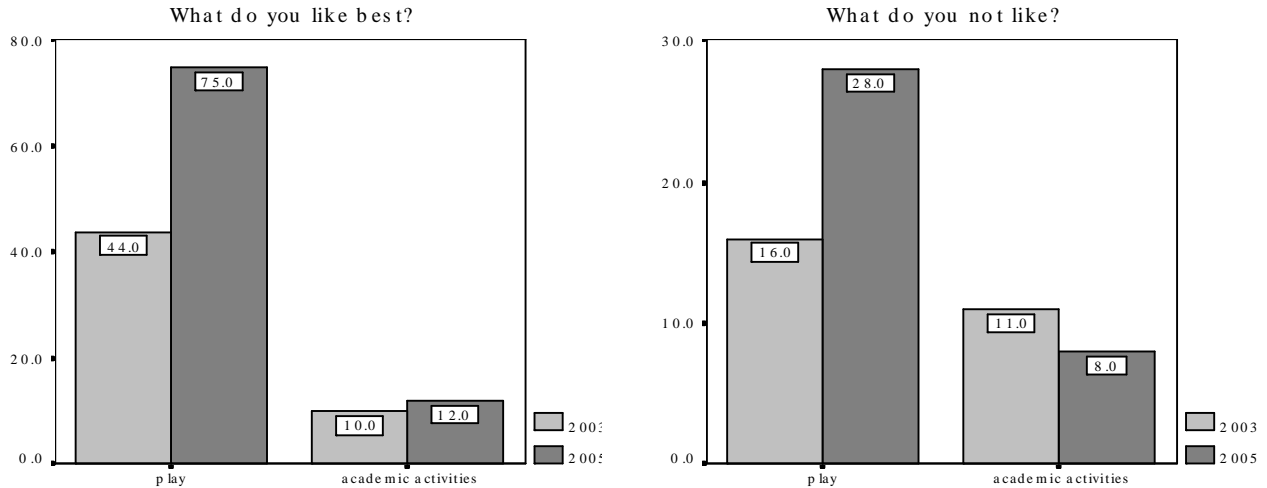


6. How do children view TFD?

In addition to participating in standardized assessments, children were interviewed about their experiences in Toronto First Duty. They were asked to tell about their day at the site from the time they get there until they go home and were asked what kinds of things they did at the site. Specific probes included asking what they liked and didn't like and what they were good at and not so good at. An important point is that "play" is the runaway winner when responses to "what do you like best" are categorized. Academic related responses, crafts and activities, etc. have far less appeal. .

Even more interesting is that play also leads the list of things that children "don't like"; play can go bad when other children "don't let you play", "don't play nice", etc. The salience of play did not change across the two samples of children (i.e., 2003 & 2005) as the figures below illustrate. These findings are a reminder that children

and their experiences need to be part of the program planning for quality early years programs.



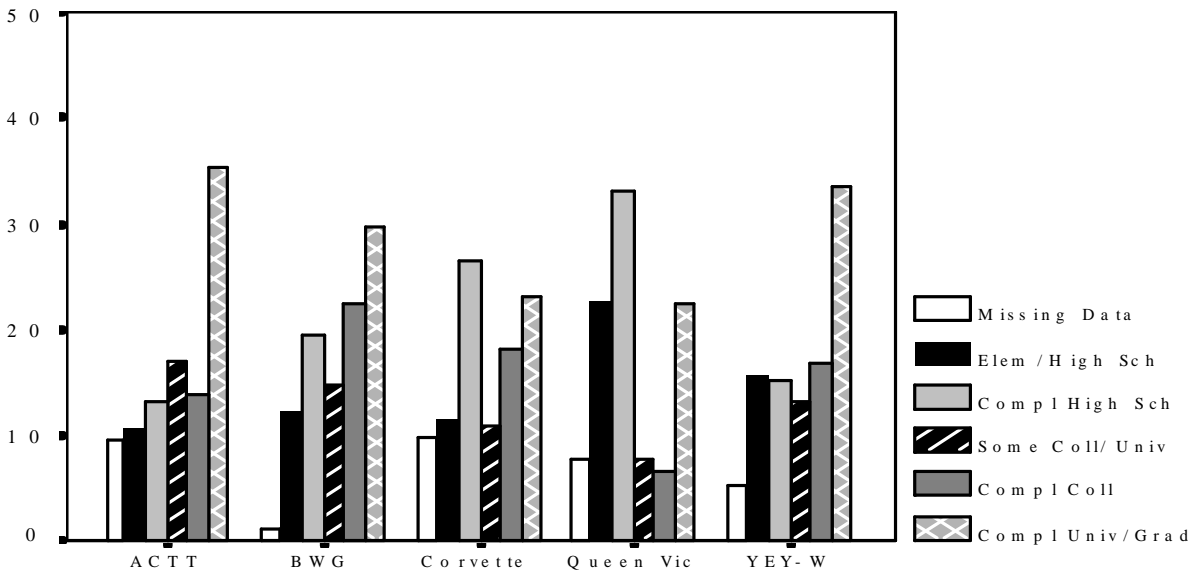
7. Can integrated services better reach out to families who do not normally use early childhood programs?

Toronto First Duty strives not only to increase access to services but to reach out to families who do not traditionally use early childhood programs. At the same time, it wants to avoid the stigma that can be associated with programs targeted to at-risk families. Tracking enrolment helped to answer whether TFD programs engaged families who are representative of the communities they serve.

Using maternal education as an indicator, researchers found the demographics of the participants are varied within and across sites. For example, the following table shows the Queen Victoria site has participants with somewhat lower levels of education compared to the other four sites. More than 20% of participants at Queen Victoria have not completed high school, yet almost the same percentage have completed university. This suggests that the TFD model has universal appeal. Similar patterns for diversity in language are seen across sites. Overall, 58% of the participating families have English as an additional language, ranging from 85% at Queen Victoria to 38% at York Early Years-Wilcox.

Intake and Tracking June 2005

Maternal Education



The universal reach of TFD is also illustrated by the YEY-W site. This site is interesting because there is a demographic divide between east and west. On the east is an affluent area while the west has concentrations of families living below the poverty line, more lone parent families, and more language minority and immigrant families. However enrolment figures show that families from both areas are taking up the TFD services.

8. Does integrating early childhood services improve access?

Parent surveys provided the information. Early surveys (2003) show the majority of parents (56.9%) reporting that they had not been able to use many of the programs/services for children and families offered at the TFD sites at that time.

From early implementation of TFD in 2003 to full implementation in 2005, improvements were noted. The percentage of parents who reported that they have not been able to use many of the programs/services for children was considerably lower (35.6%) in 2005 compared to 2003 when the majority who agreed that access was a problem (56.9%). These differences may reflect the documented efforts of sites to increase access with programming flexibility and scheduling and to increase channels of communication with parents. At the same time they reflect the desire of parents for early learning and care options for their children and the limitations of meeting parent demand for service without expansion.

9. What makes an early childhood program good?

The early learning environments in Toronto First Duty sites are informed by the most current knowledge in the early childhood field, and were guided by the following considerations:

- Quality depends on motivated and supported staff, trained in early childhood development.
- A holistic curriculum supporting the emotional, social, physical health of the child along with the acquisition of numeracy and literacy skills.
- The program has clear goals.
- Intensity – the child is involved for a long enough time to benefit.
- Multi-pronged – addresses the needs of the child and family.
- Builds relationships between child, staff and parents.
- Responds to the community and broader environment.

10. Is Toronto First Duty a success?

Overall the researchers concluded that integrated professional supports improve the quality of early childhood programs and improve outcomes for all parents and children by engaging parents in the school and their child's early learning and by supporting children's social, emotional and academic readiness for school.