



## **Toronto First Duty, Phase 3: The Bruce WoodGreen Case Study**

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## **What this report is about**

Toronto First Duty<sup>1</sup> is a decade long research project that has studied the integration of kindergarten, child care and family supports delivered by a collaborative partnership that brings together the local school, multi service provider and a host of other resources (see Corter & Pelletier, 2011; Corter & Peters, 2011; and Arimura et al., 2011 for overviews). The following research report presents preliminary findings based on evidence gathered systematically over the last year and includes data sets on child and program observations, key informant interviews, focus groups and assessment tools that measure the quality and integration level of the program. Although the general mixed methods approach was also utilized to gather evidence at several other full day early learning sites, the following report provides an overview of lessons learned at Bruce/WoodGreen Early Learning Centre (BWELC) the continuing demonstration site of Toronto First Duty. The recent results continue to show that teamwork within an integrated early learning environment requires both program and pedagogical leadership. Access to regular professional learning opportunities that maximize evidence based practice strengthen high quality programs. The educators' ability to understand and utilize a variety of tools that measure quality of programming and curriculum implementation enable the educators to deliver well rounded early learning experiences that support children's self regulation and learning. The full results of Toronto First Duty Phase 3 will be released in February 2012.

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<sup>1</sup> The City of Toronto, the Atkinson Charitable Foundation and the Toronto District School Board with the support of community agencies established Toronto First Duty. Researchers at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study and the Atkinson Centre at OISE, University of Toronto carry out the research and evaluation.

## **Background**

As Ontario proceeds with its plan to implement full day early learning kindergarten programs for all four and five year old children, the evidence on integrating children's services with family supports within a school environment poses questions and challenges on the most practical level but also on a policy level for educators, parents and government. During the first two years of implementation, unlike any other full-day school-based early learning program within the Canadian context, Ontario's Full Day Kindergarten Program is the first to establish a joint teaching team bringing together early childhood educators and elementary school teachers into one classroom environment in over 900 schools. This precedent-setting decision to change the face of the early learning profession may create the most significant challenges for implementation, but it may also provide potential new benefits to the early learning environment, and to a re-defined profession cementing the value of expertise brought forward by both sets of early childhood practitioners. The combined expertise in child development, curriculum planning and assessment enable collaboration toward a pedagogical approach that builds on the knowledge and expertise of each professional.

Early childhood educators and teachers share similar interests in the development and learning needs of young children; however, their pre-service training is considerably different in Ontario. For the most part, early childhood educators complete a two-year diploma program at a community college but many complete a degree in early childhood education. Kindergarten teachers generally complete a 4-year undergraduate degree, and then spend less than a year in teacher education. ECEs generally have more direct training in child development, but teachers have a stronger foundation in Ministry of Education and school board curriculum, assessment and learning expectations. According to the Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario, one-

third of kindergarten teachers have early childhood training, and many of these teachers have completed additional qualification courses in kindergarten training.

Against this backdrop, there have been a number of research findings that support the critical importance of advanced teacher training with a particular focus on early childhood development on preschool programming. For example, in a study linking teacher education to preschool quality, Barnett (2004) found that:

Teacher preparation in early childhood education was effective in improving teacher behavior...they expressed greater warmth for the children and greater enthusiasm for the activities they engaged in, they communicated more clearly with children, and they encouraged children to share and cooperate with their peers. They were less punitive with the children . . . [and] exhibited less apathetic and uninterested behavior (p. 5)

However, there are also contradictory studies that suggest advanced degrees alone are not effective predictors of classroom quality (Early et. al, 2007) and ongoing professional development in early childhood is also important.

In his report to the Premier of Ontario, Pascal explored a variety of staff models for the new full day early learning program and concluded that:

A blend of Kindergarten teachers and ECEs would work best for the Early Learning Program. The team was the choice of hundreds of parents and educators who shared their experience and expertise with me. Educator teams have been found to add to the strengths of the professional preparation and skill sets of both teachers and ECEs (p. 33).

This historic decision combines the skills and expertise of two education professionals and recognizes the important contribution that both educators offer. In fact, it has historical backing in data collected for the Ontario MOE report on Exemplary Kindergarten (Corter & Park, 1991). In a study of integrated care and education in several provinces, Johnson & Mathien (1998) found further evidence of economic benefit when programs costs for child care and kindergarten

were integrated. Their study also reinforced higher ratings in standards of quality in integrated programs. In more recent research reports, a number of countries including Australia, Finland and parts of Canada are considering effective approaches to blending early childhood training. However, there have been a number of questions about what it will take for this approach to be successful and what infrastructure supports are necessary to ensure full collaboration and blending of traditionally separate professions.

One model upon which program and policy experts interested in professional training can draw is the Toronto First Duty project, a collaboration amongst the City of Toronto, the Toronto District School Board, the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and its Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study and Atkinson Centre, and a host of community partners. In the first phase of Toronto First Duty a clear gap in the professional training of educators was noted. The researchers found that “early childhood professionals generally are not trained for interdisciplinary collaboration, much less for the kind of ‘trans-disciplinary work envisioned in TFD, where there are overlapping roles and seamless staff teams”. (Corter et al., 2007, p. 42). At each of the TFD sites, staff teams negotiated the individual relationships that required a shift from working within a professional silo into an effective and collaborative professional team. The support of the leadership and joint professional learning was key to success.

In the case study of the BWELC in phase 2 of Toronto First Duty, a noticeable dip was evident in both integration and program quality. Factors that led to these issues included a shift away from practices such as joint hiring, joint program planning time, as well as human resources pressures. These results precipitated a concentrated effort by the early years team to reconsider their own professional commitment to integration. Again, this was not grounded in

any formal training in how to work in an integrated professional team but based more on a program and policy expectation that all the educators would function as a team to improve quality. Under the guidance of the principal and the early years coordinator, “the early years team underwent an intensive process of recalibrating the program, re-focusing their goals and re-envisioning their professional commitment to an integrated early learning environment for the children that included the active involvement of parents” (Corter et. al., 2009 p. 12).

At this juncture, teacher training and early childhood professional preparation programs do not have a specific focus on “working together” as a collaborative team, although there is growing professional development designed to support this need. The Toronto First Duty research project serves to inform policy development, professional learning and improved practices for integrated early learning environments.

### **Toronto First Duty Background**

Toronto First Duty combines kindergarten, child care and parenting supports into a seamless full-day integrated model for young children and their families. Three phases of Toronto First Duty research describe the design, implementation and impact of this early learning model ([www.toronto.ca/firstduty](http://www.toronto.ca/firstduty)). In particular, evidence from the ongoing Toronto First Duty Phase 3 provides important lessons to help inform provincial policy; the shared knowledge that kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators bring to the findings is of particular relevance to emerging provincial policy concerning early learning. TFD Phase 3 details the story of the BWELC, housed in Bruce Public School, integrated with WoodGreen’s child care and community based programs and the Toronto District School Board Parenting and Family Literacy Centre.

The findings are based on a detailed case study approach that includes both quantitative and qualitative data collection with educators, children and partners throughout the research study. Qualitative data collection in Phase 3 included semi-structured interviews with program leaders, focus group meetings with educators and participant observation in BWELC steering committee meetings. Quantitative data included a review of the Indicators of Change data on integration progress (see Toronto First Duty 2), a program evaluation of the program environment in the preschool, kindergarten and parenting centre using the Early Childhood Education Rating Scale-Revised and an analysis of the City of Toronto Operating Criteria (see <http://www.toronto.ca/children/dmc/OC08/9540.htm>). Additional data were collected utilizing a newly created tool called the Child Observation Framework, developed by the Toronto First Duty (TFD) and Best Start Research Teams (Corter, Pelletier, et al, forthcoming). The goal of the Child Observation Framework is to evaluate child opportunities for self-regulation and play behaviour in Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten (FDEL-K) classrooms. Its purpose is to develop an approach to assist educators and researchers in observing and reporting children's self-regulation, learning and play behaviour.

### **The Early Years Team**

In the full-day early learning program at Bruce School, two types of education professionals work collaboratively, demonstrating the benefits and the challenges of blending the expertise of both professions. The early years team brings together the kindergarten teacher, early childhood educators, and additional special education and family supports to create a program intended to meet the needs of young children and their families. The team works within a seamless program model that is carefully planned, using observations of individual children to inform a curriculum



process that embeds both the Ministry of Education's *Kindergarten Program* and the *Early Learning for Every Childhood Today* curriculum framework. Both the early childhood educators and the teachers share program and evaluation responsibilities, engage with families formally and informally and establish a routine that includes joint planning time. However, program integration is not always a smooth ride and the research from TFD phase 3 at BWELC has found that the following factors are necessary to achieve success:

- Commitment from the entire early years team to program integration
- School and program leadership
- Supports and resources
- Time and space to meet
- Ongoing joint professional development
- Reciprocal mentoring and professional respect

An integrated program model brings together professionals who are committed to program practices that support optimal learning conditions for young children. In focus groups, both groups of professionals indicated that working together had been rewarding although, it can also be challenging. Interviews with teachers and early childhood educators described differentials in wages and benefits that often add to the unspoken inequity between the educators. However, there are also important lessons that the staff were able to share with the researchers. One significant and recurring theme was the importance of reciprocal mentoring and professional respect between educators to ensure success in integration.

During the focus groups, staff shared their experience working with a room partner who may have different expertise. According to one early childhood educator, “teachers seem to have a better understanding of how to evaluate specific skills to prepare them for the upper grades.

We could benefit from that in ECE”. This was evident in both the program quality measurements in ECERS-R and in tools that measure the level and quality of interactions between children and adults. Interviews with the early years educators indicate recognition that both professionals could learn from each other’s knowledge base. However, what has been absolutely clear through evidence gathering is the level of reciprocal respect for each other’s skills and expertise.

I know a lot of times, kindergarten teachers feel isolated because their curriculum is different from the rest of the school’s so it’s nice to work with people who are working with the same children. You don’t feel isolated because you can talk about issues and get ideas on how to communicate with parents (Kindergarten Teacher)

The team brings a broader range of expertise to the classroom and allows for more individualized attention for the children. After-school programming for older children is offered at the site.

The continuity of consistent adults is viewed as important, particularly for children in the earlier years. According to one early childhood educator:

From the beginning of the child’s day in the same classroom, you can assume it is less stressful for the kids and parents – the child has the security of having his staff members for the entire day – the educators have a sense of the child’s needs and have learned to merge interests and knowledge – it’s been an excellent learning opportunity

### **The challenges for an integrated early years team**

There are a number of common issues that were raised by both the kindergarten teachers and the early childhood educators including the need for people on the team to want to work collaboratively. Findings from Toronto Duty Phase 1 suggest that some teams that didn’t want to collaborate in the beginning, developed a collaborative approach by having time to meet where they discovered common goals for children and for program improvement. Without a

common goal in mind, the practice of integrated teaching at times became unnecessarily arduous.

According to an early childhood educator:

I think one of the biggest challenges I have found is (not) having a team that buys into the model and that could be either the ECEs or the teachers because as an ECE there is a feeling that you are doing the same job as someone in the room who is making quite a lot more money than you. So that's definitely a challenge and for myself personally. I am willing to overlook that piece because I feel this is the best place for me to better my career in the long run. But I have also worked with staff/teachers that don't buy into this program and it makes it difficult to have a collaborative approach when you have two people coming from two different worlds. (Early Childhood Educator)

Another early childhood educator questions the teacher's pedagogical approach by stating:

There are parts of her curriculum that don't necessarily follow our (ECE) philosophy. And when I say that I am talking about the amount of pre-cut out things. I understand the need for the repetitive nature of letter books is going to allow the children to learn *but* changing it up would enhance that experience (Early Childhood Educator).

These two narratives suggest that taking the time to meet regularly supported by pedagogical leadership would create opportunities to resolve different approaches to planning and implementation. One educator suggested that when either a teacher or ECE is new to the program there needs to be time to transition and adapt to a new environment. Joint teaching teams may benefit from additional mentoring and advice from experienced educators by visiting a demonstration school. She notes the teacher at the demonstration school had a lot of experience. "She took the Reggio approach and she had such practical ideas that I have actually implemented immediately and it has been wonderful" (Kindergarten Teacher).

Merging two professionals on a large-scale basis creates infrastructure challenges. However, these findings suggest that relational issues need to be addressed at the micro level as a way to prevent differences from becoming larger than necessary. The following section provides suggestions for effective program delivery.

## **Keys to Success**

Central to an effective integrated curriculum framework is the opportunity for both educators to participate in consistent and joint program planning. The learning that takes place in the professional realm also falls along a continuum of activities ranging from self-reflective practice to joint delivery of workshops. In this particular case, the early childhood educator and teacher may have different pedagogical styles, but their interest in the children's development is at par. For example, during an interview with a kindergarten teacher, she described how she had developed new questioning strategies when working with young children. She states, "the ECE teacher knows exactly the question to ask when she wants to expand on an idea". Siraj-Blatchford (2004) suggests that this pedagogical sharing of knowledge contributes to higher quality early years programs supported by an "effective pedagogue who orchestrates learning by making interventions such as scaffolding, discussing, monitoring which are sensitive to the curriculum concept" (p. 720). In the case of BWELC, the educators share expertise. However, curriculum leaders and principals can certainly operate as curriculum pedagogues who support the improvement of program delivery.

## **School and Program Leadership**

As with any innovative model, leadership was paramount. School leaders juggle numerous administrative responsibilities whilst still maintaining the leadership role in curriculum and pedagogy. In a team teaching environment that brings two professionals together, the leadership took on the additional responsibility of facilitating a new kind of teaching partnership. The role of the school principal and the early years coordinator was critical in setting the benchmark for what functioned as a true team approach to teaching and learning. The leadership's ability to demonstrate a collaborative working relationship seemed to influence the

educators' desire to do the same. Just as the leadership role was important to demonstrate integration, the lack of leadership was also seen as problematic.

The first few meetings were better organized...because they were facilitated by an office staff member. The office provided staff relief so we could meet. This year I was noticing a difference because we never had a coordinated time to meet for program planning.

The need for joint planning time in a scheduled way was a consistent theme for the educators and when made available, it seemed to defuse some of the program issues. All of the early years team members indicated that the role of the early years coordinator was just as important as the role of the principal, particularly since the principal is often managing a number of other school related issues and the early years coordinator is focused on the younger aged programs.

Nevertheless, it is the principal who retains control of school management. As demonstrated in Toronto First Duty Phase 2, central to this process is a principal who understands the value of joint planning, teaching, collaborative practice, reciprocal learning and engaged learners (Corter et. al. 2009).

The implications for labour negotiations are significant as we move toward a teaching team that includes one group of educators who are grounded in a provincial collective agreement that includes salary scales, consistent standards for benefits, access to 'prep time' and ongoing professional service supports. On the other hand, early childhood educators are just beginning a process of collective organizing within school boards and as it currently stands, the differentials between salaries, benefits and working conditions will continue to have an impact on the ability of the educator team to work from the same program principles. Although teachers receive significantly more prep time, at Toronto First Duty, joint prep time was provided because the leadership facilitated opportunities for the team of educators to meet. This was not a negotiated

component of either collective agreement although at a systems level, joint planning time would need to be negotiated. It was understood from all levels of involvement that planning for joint program time was a fundamental component of building an effective teaching partnership.

### **Supports and Resources**

The early years team identified two areas of support to enable the staff to work in a more seamless manner to support an integrated program for children. In the focus groups with educators, there was agreement by all the educators that the availability of curriculum specialists provided a deeper exploration of curriculum planning and pedagogical practice that in turn improved the early years program. In response to a key question that asked, “what kind of supports are necessary in an integrated environment”, one educator cited the value of an objective examination of the environment to improve the design of the program. She suggests, “the consultant from the city is there to monitor the program but also helps us think about how we are organizing the program”. Although school board curriculum specialists tend to work more closely with teachers, within an integrated staff environment, both educators can benefit from this additional resource. At the same time, the early childhood educators likewise noted that this gave the teachers even more time to think and work on program plans outside the class indicating they would benefit from this learning opportunity as well.

As part of the third phase of Toronto First Duty, the program and research team turned their focus on how children with special needs could be more strongly supported within an integrated environment. To frame the analysis, the researchers examined the program by administering the SpecialLink Early Childhood Inclusion Quality Scale. This tool was developed for assessing inclusion quality in early childhood centres and for helping centres move toward higher quality inclusion. As Pascal (2009) has noted in his recommendations on full day

kindergarten, “all staff will be qualified to notice developmental delays, initiate appropriate responses and know when more specialized interventions are required” (p. 22). However, preliminary analysis demonstrated that in order to support children with special needs within an integrated program environment all the educators need additional joint training to work closely together to ensure a more cohesive individualized program planning approach. In order to ensure this is possible, the early years team noted the need for joint professional development especially to understand more deeply the learning needs of children with autism spectrum disorder and behaviour challenges.

### **Educator training**

The Phase 3 investigation also touched on issues of educator training. The integrated early learning program brings together educators with a variety of educational and professional training experiences. The team includes kindergarten teachers who have completed teacher training but who may also have additional qualification in early childhood development. The team also includes early childhood educators who have expertise in working with children with special needs. However, a fundamental difference between the two types of educators is the length of time of training and the content of training. During the study, the educators were asked if the type and length of training they received prepared them adequately for working in an early learning program. When exploring the validity of the educators’ training, both professionals suggested that neither type of training alone was entirely adequate, reaffirming the findings of the Exemplary Kindergarten study two decades ago (Corter & Park, 1991). All the educators who participated in this study agreed that the most effective form of in-service training occurred when participating in joint professional learning.

The really big piece is the difference in training. Quite a lot of teachers are not comfortable with the early years especially four and five year olds. They don’t have the

developmental piece and the knowledge of child development. For a lot of teachers who have not taught kindergarten before it is quite intimidating and overwhelming. (Early Childhood Educator)

Teacher education should have different entry requirements – experience should be taken into account – it’s not just about grades – TFD is starting to be discussed – focus on kindergarten is changing in education but teachers are really prepared with an ECE degree or MA at ICS – more knowledge and more prepared. AQ in ECE is good but perhaps build more ECE training. Although it seems intense, they seem more knowledgeable. (Kindergarten Teacher)

One teacher described the ECE training program as very strong but acknowledged “they could train more on assessment, reporting, and the administrative requirements” (Kindergarten teacher). This is certainly valuable information for early childhood educators employed by school boards who are now required to operate under the Education Act and not the Day Nurseries Act. Teachers become quite accustomed to dealing with a myriad of expectations including standards under the Ontario College of Teachers, individual school board policies, obligations under collective agreements and rather specific requirements that ensure when children are promoted to the upper grades, they meet minimum learning standards.

In the focus groups the teachers recognized the multitude of supports they received from their local school board although, they also clearly stated the inadequacy of these supports. When asked for recommendations on how to improve ECE training, a teacher suggests better understanding of literacy and numeracy development. She states, “you can’t always know this will be successful through emergent learning. Sometimes you have to plan for it.” In a study of early childhood educators’ preparedness to support mathematics education, Ginsburg, Lee and Boyd (2008) argue that ECE training needs to be more rigorous to include improved understanding of children’s mathematical thinking. Similarly, although play-based learning may foster self-regulation (Diamond & Lee, 2011), not all early educators are trained in the tasks of monitoring and fostering this important area of development. These are relatively new areas of



research and may raise red flags for practitioners concerned with programming that is overly structured. However, as more staff teams are integrated in school-based programs, these issues do need attention from policy makers.

In integrated early learning environments the partnership between the educators is complex and dependent on a degree of reciprocal respect and mentoring. Over time, a desire to support each other's knowledge and expertise becomes inherent but there remains a strong identity with the individual's professional association. There is growing recognition that the existing model of teacher training is inadequate as we move toward a more widely accepted notion that both early childhood and teacher training are important ingredients toward a more cohesive early learning program. As the province of Ontario brings together early childhood educators and teachers in a teaching and learning partnership, lessons from the educators at Toronto First Duty can play a particularly important role in informing the policy and educational direction for the future learning needs of educators.

### **Key recommendations**

- **Leadership** - Supportive and knowledgeable leaders are important players who support ongoing professional learning and provide pedagogical leadership
- **Curriculum Planning** - Joint planning time is critical to an integrated early learning program. The wide gap between teachers having over 200 minutes per week in planning time compared to approximately 60 minutes for early childhood educators creates significant discord. The joint planning time that teachers and early childhood educators have together is imperative to strengthening program curriculum and planning for individual children
- **Mentorship** - Curriculum mentors provide advice, suggest innovative curriculum approaches and enable the educators to create an environment that supports self-regulation
- **Professional Training** - Collaborative pre-service training and joint professional learning supports a culture of learning, peer support and knowledge transfer

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