Expanding Service Delivery: The Study for the Jane-Finch Ontario Early Years Centre

Prepared by Mothercraft
Principal Investigaor: Vladimir Mikadze
Author: Jessica Chan

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1. Introduction

The Jane-Finch Ontario Early Years Centre (OEYC) is situated in a diverse community and serves individuals from a wide variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The centre also assists a large population of new immigrant families that require support in adjusting to their environment and acquiring settlement services. In order to provide effective programs and further improve program delivery that meets the unique and complex needs of this population, the management staff at the Jane-Finch OEYC approached the Research and Evaluation Department at Mothercraft.[1] It requested a discussion-based, informative study to explore the particular service delivery issues experienced by the centre, and to investigate how these issues are addressed and resolved by other OEYC agencies. In response to this internally raised request, the study identified several areas of growth through discussion with the Jane-Finch OEYC staff. Following this, investigators identified four other OEYC agencies situated in neighbourhoods with similar levels of school readiness in their children, and socioeconomic and demographic profiles that resembled the Jane-Finch community.

Management personnel from these agencies as well as the Jane-Finch OEYC management were then interviewed about their own experiences of the issues outlined by the Jane-Finch staff, and the strategies that they used to resolve them. Semi-structured interviews were used, which generally adhered to the following question format:

  a. How did the issue arise?

  b. How would you describe the issue in your area?

  c. What approaches did you use to address this issue?

  d. What was the result, and what have you learned through using this approach?

The following report outlines four areas for development presented by the Jane-Finch OEYC, their current approaches to these issues, and alternative solutions offered by the management staff from various OEYC agencies. The purpose of the report is to discuss the issues that tend to be reflective of distinct socio-economic environments and to inform the broader early years' community regarding possible approaches to specific service delivery practices. The report does not aim to evaluate program efficiency of the participating OEYCs. Current research that relates to these issues is also presented where relevant.

2. Reducing Barriers to Participation and Engaging Special Populations

a. Language and Culture

The Jane-Finch OEYC is situated in a multicultural community. The staff is looking at ways to further engage participation amongst individuals in the community with a limited

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1 In April of 2007, Mothercraft developed the Research and Evaluation Department later transformed into Community Data Group to focus exclusively on data collection, management, analysis, and on the publication of new knowledge in the early years' community.

understanding of English. Although the agency has attempted to address this issue by offering services in various languages, partnering participants who speak the same language together, and hiring staff members and volunteers who speak other languages, new communities and cultural groups continue to emerge in the Jane-Finch area, and the staff is considering new strategies to promote their participation in programs. Many new immigrants are also unfamiliar with the OEYC agencies and the educational system in general, making them hesitant to participate. Staff members would like to be able to support individuals who may be having difficulty finding employment and daycare.

In addition to providing programs in various languages, and communicating through participants and staff who are well versed in other languages, agencies facing similar challenges have also employed cultural linguistic workers who are responsible for strengthening the cultural competencies of the staff by helping employees effectively communicate with individuals from other language or cultural backgrounds. In addition, fluency with languages that are in high demand in the community is also often included in employee job descriptions. Furthermore, some agencies have translators that come in from partner organizations, neighbourhood information centres, and volunteer programs. Partnering with ESL schools in the community to help with language learning has also been an effective strategy. Several agencies also emphasize building close relationships with parents who are already members of the program, so that, as their language skills develop, they can be asked to partner with and support new members who attend the program. Written resources are also handed out to participants to take home and translate into their own language. Alternatively, print material such as signs and brochures can be provided in the predominant languages.

In cases where participants speak a language which none of the staff or participants are familiar with, cue cards and gestures could be used to communicate. Language is kept very simple, and key words, such as "good morning" are identified and translated. When translation is not possible, the most important factor in encouraging participation is to provide a welcoming environment where individuals can come to meet and play with others. Although there will always be individuals attending programs who do not speak the language, OEYC staff members emphasize that these participants are still able participate and enjoy the activities provided (music, circle time), and that they will learn more English as they continue their involvement.

In order to encourage participation among culturally diverse participants, OEYCs highlight the importance of taking a grassroots approach by ensuring that staff members are representative of their participants, and that they reflect the cultural diversity of the community. This ensures that employees are knowledgeable about cultural traditions, and that they know how to approach people from various backgrounds. In addition to the staff being representative of its constituents, cultural diversity should also be reflected in the physical features of the centre; pictures of families, and toys that are bought should all promote cultural competency.

In order to support new immigrants to Canada, referrals are made from an agency through partnerships with neighbourhood information, clothing banks, settlement workers in schools, subsidy offices, and multi-service child care programs. Clothing exchanges are also facilitated in order to provide participants with free clothing. In addition, community partners can come to the agency to talk about how to write job descriptions, how to look for employment, and how to find child care. Parents are also given access to phones at the agency and are given a list of phone numbers of important resource centres

to call, as well as a written guide outlining what questions they should be asking. For families in need of extra assistance, staff members go to the phone with the parents and help them make the call. They will then re-visit the client, ask them how it went, and provide more motivation if they have not yet made the call. New immigrants can also be partnered with others who are new to the country, or with those who have been in the country for a longer period of time, in order to gain information and social support. Although these individuals often have needs that exceed the OEYC mandate, staff members acknowledge that the family is a system, and that issues need to be addressed in a holistic manner.

b. Travel/Transportation Barriers

An additional barrier to participation is that newcomers are required to travel to the agency, and that distance, poor weather, and travel costs often discourage individuals from attending. Many participants do not have access to public transportation or strollers.

c. Trust

In culturally diverse areas similar to Jane-Finch, trust is another issue that turns into a barrier to participation if an agency is not concerned with constant improvement and maintenance of trustful relationships with participants in order to decrease drop-out rates.

To encourage family participation in programs, agencies offer strollers, cribs, playpens, and infant sheets and blankets to participants. One OEYC has an organizational van that is used to pick up families and bring them to the agency. All of these items are donated from other participants, partner organizations, and neighbourhood information centres. Posters and flyers are also distributed in order to encourage these donations. In addition, TTC tokens and food vouchers are offered as part of the programs. These additional resources are made available through various grants, donations and funding from community partners, ministries and charitable organizations. Several agencies have also identified clusters in the community that are heavily populated and have opened smaller satellites in these areas to increase accessibility. In order to ensure that programs are accessible to participants, some agencies observe attendance rates and adjust the timing of program delivery accordingly.

To address issues of trust among participants, staff members emphasize gradually getting to know parents, and letting them become familiar with program facilitators before beginning the program. Speaking in a gentle voice, keeping language simple, explaining things thoroughly and being respectful of others fosters the development of a trusting relationship. Staff members are informed that their first priority is to spend time with individual families, get to know them, and let them know that they are there to help them.

In order to empower participants and to identify areas of need, evaluation forms, suggestion boxes, and parent advisory committees have also been established. These forms of feedback have helped to determine participant satisfaction and can provide insight into perceptions of trust relationships between participants and staff. They also allow participants to help with program development in order to give them a sense of ownership over the program.

d. Adolescent Mothers

The Jane-Finch OEYC has reached out to the population of adolescent mothers in the Jane-Finch area by offering a teen moms program that provides education concerning prenatal nutrition as a preventative measure to decrease the occurrence of low-birthweight. Evening programs are also offered in order to meet the needs of teen mothers who are often still attending school. Although these programs have been effective, the staff has indicated that teen mothers often feel isolated and depressed, and would like to continue integrating them into regular programs with more mature mothers who can serve as role models. Although teenage mothers feel that the issues they face are unique, and that they would not be able to relate to older mothers, it is hoped that this integration will break the cycle of isolation that young mothers can experience.

In addition to the Jane-Finch OEYC, several other agencies have identified young and often lone mothers as their "hard to reach" population. In addition to providing evening programs, several centres work with shelters, and offer weekend programs, mobile programs, drop-in programs in schools, outreach programs, and home visitations in order to target young, high-risk moms. Like the Jane-Finch OEYC, prenatal programs are also made available to these mothers, which are offered in partnership with public health. These programs are funded through partnerships and are facilitated by dieticians, and public health nurses, and are offered in conjunction with post natal infant stimulation program. It has been suggested that having programs specifically designed for these women will increase their likelihood to stay and participate in programs with more mature moms.

Some OEYC agencies also recommend offering programs at several different times during the day. Providing food and fun activities, such as hip-hop dance classes, has also been effective in engaging teen moms. One agency's experience is that teen mothers are more likely to attend programs that are held outdoors in the summertime when there is a large crowd of people in attendance. These outdoor programs allow the young mothers to come and go as they wish, and the activities are not focused directly on them, making them more comfortable and willing to participate.

It is ultimately the decision of the mother to participate with more mature parents, and they may or may not decide to integrate. When they do not wish to participate in these programs, it is important to ensure that they still receive the same information and services which address issues of early development, nutrition, and self-care.

From the Literature
Although it is important to obtain information from participants who attend the OEYC about how to improve service delivery, research indicates that collecting barrier-related information from non-participants in the community is also important. This can be done through open-ended interviews over the phone, or brief mail surveys (Spoth, Redmond & Hockaday, 1996). Conducting focus groups is also an effective method of obtaining information about how to encourage participation among difficult to reach populations (Lengua, Roosa & Schupak-Neuberg, 1992). Focus group interviews are small group discussions that address a particular topic and usually involve six to twelve participants that are recruited from the community or in schools. These groups can help to discover the concerns that families in the community have, how these families can best be served in a parenting group, how to encourage these families to participate in intervention, how to sustain the participation of difficult to reach families, and the best means of informing

families about these programs (Lengua et al., 1992). This information can be drawn from target groups such as single, adolescent mothers, or members of a specific cultural group. The combined effort often leads to a wide range of information, insights and ideas (Lengua, et al., 1992).

In order to promote cultural sensitivity in the workplace, several researchers have documented the effectiveness of establishing staff training programs that incorporate strength-based, and equity-based multicultural perspectives (McGoldrick, Almeida & Preto, 1999). These training programs increase awareness and understanding of difference, inequality, and diversity (Robinson & Diaz, 1999), and can educate staff about variations in the timing and transition of developmental milestones (e.g. toilet training, feeding, and exploration) across cultures, as well as cultural variations in caregiver roles and responsibilities. They can also increase awareness of personal perceptions, prejudices and stereotypes (Harry, 2008).

With respect to young, adolescent mothers, research suggests that mentoring programs can be an effective method of reaching this high-risk population (Waller, Brown, & Whittle, 1999). The most important benefit of mentoring programs for teen mothers is social support, which is a key factor in improving developmental outcomes. It has been shown that social support during pregnancy, including encouragement to maintain good nutrition and regular prenatal care can prevent social isolation, and reduce stress levels among young mothers (Waller, et al., 1999). Although mentors are usually recruited from the community, older mothers attending the OEYC agency can also serve as mentors for young mothers. However, it is essential that both parties voluntarily participate in this mentoring program. Furthermore, mentors should be interviewed about their motivations for mentoring, family experiences, views on teen pregnancy, and beliefs about raising children, in order to determine their 'goodness of fit' with the mentoring program (Waller et al., 1999). Endurance and optimism are essential qualities to look for in mentors as many pregnant teens have experienced negative life events that lead to difficulty trusting others, and a tendency to repeat negative patterns in current relationships (Waller et al., 1999).

3. Strengthening Behaviour Management Skills
In the interest of safety, staff members at the Jane-Finch OEYC have outlined the necessity of supporting parents in setting limits for children who can be difficult to manage. In addition, they would like to promote appropriate behaviour management strategies in a less intrusive manner. Moreover, as caregivers from different backgrounds display diverse parenting strategies, staff would also like to discuss with others how to approach these families in a more culturally sensitive manner.

Nutrition plays an important role in the children's behaviour and the Jane-Finch OEYC would like to discuss various approaches to encouraging healthy eating habits among participants. Currently, program facilitators are modeling appropriate behaviour management strategies, offering healthy snacks to families, and encouraging physical activity by providing space for children to run, play, and release their energy.

In order to strengthen behavioural guidance skills among caregivers, program guidelines are given to families when they come in to the agency. These guidelines are then collaboratively reviewed by the staff and parents. Staff members are also kept aware of current research concerning effective behaviour management strategies, and are

responsible for highlighting, simplifying, and sharing key points with participants. Guest speakers are also brought in to the centres, and brochures are given out to parents on topics such as "How to speak to your child" and "Why fighting is wrong". If staff members are particularly concerned about a certain family, developmental screening instruments are used in order to identify specific difficulties and help parents assist their child in areas of need. It is also important to provide parents with alternative strategies for handling situations without embarrassing, judging or criticizing them. Speaking gently and always incorporating a positive comment can be an effective strategy. Finally, debriefing sessions are often held by staff members to discuss any issues that came up during programming, talk about how to help the family improve, and brainstorm about additional resources to offer families in need.

In order to promote cultural competency, program facilitators are encouraged to be sensitive to different cultural norms, and recognize that there are many different ways to raise children. Staff members are encouraged to be aware of and accept these differences in parenting styles unless children are harming others.

In order to encourage healthy eating habits, snacks are served after each program in accordance with Canada's healthy food guide. Families are also discouraged from bringing chips and sweet snacks with them to programs. Recipes are handed out, library books are referred to participants, and information is given out from the food guide concerning food choices, food proportions, and times of the day children should be eating. Caregivers can also be referred to parent nutrition programs that may be helpful. However, it is also important to recognize that people from diverse backgrounds do not eat the same food, and to incorporate different cultural foods into the snacks and nutritional information that are offered to families.

In several agencies, physical exercise is incorporated through structured activities such as obstacle courses, music programs, and dance programs. These programs are especially important during the winter months when children are not able to play outside. Some agencies use outdoor spaces that are permitted for use through the City of Toronto, and others rent space from community centres through purchase of service agreements. Physical exercise videotapes are also made available for parents to borrow for home use. In addition to these strategies, participants who live in close proximity to each other are sometimes matched together so that their children can play together and provide each other with social support and motivation to improve nutrition and physical exercise.

From the Literature

Research suggests that negative, unresponsive, and inconsistent parental behaviour, as well as high levels of family adversity are associated with problems in early childhood that are predictive of difficulties at school-age (Campbell, 1994). However, the age of the child also plays an important factor in the types and frequencies of behaviour concerns that are reported by parents, teachers, and other caregivers. Research on age related changes suggests that many difficult behaviours reflect normal developmental change, or age-related conflict and frustration (Campbell, 1994). For example, problems with defiance and discipline appear to be normal in toddler-hood, when children are struggling with their need for autonomy and are testing the limits of their caregivers (Campbell, 1994). Taking these developmental milestones into consideration, isolated behaviours may be difficult to deal with, but do not necessarily reflect serious problems. A variety of problem behaviours need to be present before a significant problem that

requires diagnosis or intervention should be considered (Campbell, 1994). In light of these findings, current research, information, and workshops on behaviour difficulties that reflect age-related changes can be provided to staff and parents, and can guide decisions about whether or not behaviour management intervention is needed.

4. Preparing Children for School and Addressing Separation Anxiety

Many parents attending the Jane-Finch OEYC have not been separated from their children before, and programs that require children and parents to be in separate rooms can be a challenge for these families. It is the staff's initiative to encourage parents to prepare their children for school, so that they will be ready for the separation. Currently, parents are being encouraged to leave their child with a relative or friend on occasion, and to increase this practice gradually in order to reduce separation anxiety.

Some OEYCs have school readiness programs designed specifically to address this issue. These two-week programs are offered as part of the Kindergarten registration process in collaboration with schools, principles and Kindergarten teachers. OEYC staff members meet with each of the families and introduce their programs about the socialization of children. They also use screening tools, such as the Nipissing Developmental Screen, to educate parents about developmental milestones and inform them of where their child should be at a particular age. Although the parent and child initially stay together at the start of the program, the parents are then taken into a separate room for an hour, where they learn what to expect their child to learn in school. The children remain in a room with a teacher and staff members who support them and go through what they will experience in Kindergarten. This program provides an opportunity for staff to meet new families and do outreach to the community.

In most OEYC agencies, programs that involve separation begin and end with the children and parents together. Parents are notified at the beginning of the program that they will be leaving the room, and are re-assured that they can look in to check on their child, as long as their child does not see them. Families who experience difficulty with this process can leave for a short time period, and gradually increase the time spent away from the child with successive visits. Parents are also instructed to tell the child that they will be leaving, where they are going, who they will be with, and how long they will be gone, rather than sneaking away. This helps the child settle down much faster after the separation. Written resources and workshops to help with the separation are also offered to participants. In one particular OEYC, the workshops and childcare settings are located beside each other and are separated by a one-way mirror so that parents can see their children, but children cannot see their parents.

Although these methods can help children prepare for school, many OEYC staff members emphasize that it is not necessary for mothers and children to separate, and that they should always be given the choice to do so. Caregivers are always given the option to bring their child with them to parent workshops and programs.

From the Literature

There is an extensive body of literature on the attachment relationship between mother and infant, which shows that separation anxiety is a normal developmental process that caregivers and their young children experience (Nelson & Bennett, 2008). The

attachment relationship develops very early in a child's life, and is activated when the child is separated from their caregiver (Nelson & Bennett, 2008). When the mother leaves, attachment behaviours and signals that are likely to attract the mother's attention are likely to be initiated (e.g. crying, clinging, grasping, seeking for the mother) (Bischof, 1975). Although intense and prolonged separation anxiety may be a cause for concern, children who are securely attached to their mothers normally display distress signals at the time of separation. However, they eventually calm down and are able to explore and play in an independent and self-reliant manner (Rinkoff & Corter, 1980). Furthermore, this pattern of behaviour has been demonstrated among securely attached infants and caregivers across cultures (Nelson & Bennett, 2008). Given these findings, it is important to educate staff and parents about separation anxiety, and reassure them by letting them know that it is a normal and healthy stage of development.

If the goal is to help children be able to separate from their parents when they enter school, then children must first be able to experience a secure relationship with their parent in the OEYC environment.

5. Identifying and Providing Support for High-Stress Families
Jane-Finch OEYC staff members are endeavouring to support families who are under stress and who may experience mental health, or addiction problems or violence in the home. However, it is difficult to identify these at-risk families as they often do not disclose these issues. Approaching and helping families in a culturally sensitive manner is also an important consideration. A related issue is that these high-stress families can be aggressive with children and staff, and display inappropriate behaviour.

In addition to aggression and violence among participants, staff members also expressed a concern for community violence and the negative effect it has on participants attending the centre. Because of this often dangerous environment, parents do not feel safe traveling to the centre, interacting with others, or leaving their children in programs.

OEYC agencies take a team approach towards identifying and providing support for high-stress families. After programs, debriefing sessions are held by the staff to discuss which families may be having difficulties and to identify resources to which these families can be directed to. The staff members also build trusting relationships with their families by providing a welcoming environment, partnering with other agencies in order to refer clients to other resources, and ensuring participants that they can turn to the centre during stressful times when they have an issue. Team members also deliver dropin programs in schools, and identify high-risk families through school referrals. Other OEYC staff members emphasize being alert to changes in the norm, and bringing any concerns to the parent's attention. However, they also recognize that it is only possible to help these families when they are willing to accept help, and that it is ultimately their decision whether or not to seek support. Leaving resources and information in strategic places, and providing specific workshops and brochures to individuals who are thought to benefit from this information can also be helpful. Furthermore, group discussion and dialogue can break down stigma by letting people know that others are experiencing the same issues, which can encourage disclosure. If participants are willing, small groupwork is also encouraged, whereby families who are experiencing similar issues (e.g. a partner who drinks) are introduced and asked to talk to each other in order to provide mutual support. One OEYC also offers a program to prevent violence against women that incorporates a special disclosure procedure, whereby women can attend without their

partners knowing.

Staff members also take a team approach when high-stress leads to hostility and aggression. In the case of an angry parent, rather than having one staff member manage on his/her own, two employees will address the issue together and de-escalate the situation. Brainstorming sessions at team meetings and debriefing sessions are held in order to discuss strategies to deal with the situation. Principles, values and policy statements can also be posted around the centre to remind everyone that individuals need to be treated with respect, and workshops can be given on how to reduce bias and show consideration for others. Training on assertiveness, and how to deal with difficult people can also be offered to staff. In serious cases of physical threats and abuse, the OEYC agencies have notified the police and requested personal safety training.

With regards to neighbourhood violence, none of the other OEYC agencies felt that this was a major issue in their community, and neighbourhoods were generally perceived as safe. Some agencies suggested working with the community to prevent violence as an effective strategy.

From the Literature

Although violence was not found to be prevalent in the neighbourhoods of the OEYC agencies that were interviewed, research suggests that community organizations can play an important role in reducing community violence. Wallerstein (2008) argued for a community empowerment approach towards addressing issues of poverty, violence, and drug use in neighbourhoods. This involves both community collaboration at the horizontal level, and community-organizing efforts to influence power structures at the vertical level (Wallerstein, 2008). For example, at the horizontal level, community agencies can foster and facilitate the development of trust-building and communication between neighbours by hosting meetings, initiating block parties, or working together to improve programs in the neighbourhood. At the vertical level, community organizations and individuals can work together to advocate for new programs, more funding and additional resources from the government and outside the neighbourhood. This creates a strong sense of community, perceived neighbourhood control, and neighbourhood participation, which are correlated with health status and depression (Wallerstein, 2008). An example of the community empowerment approach is the Youthlink project in New Mexico which involved the development of Community Action Teams that identify youth and community needs and use these needs as a guide to formulate action and policy plans. (See Wallerstein, 2008 for more details).

6. Conclusion

The Jane-Finch OEYC is currently employing a number of effective strategies also used by other OEYC agencies, making it possible to build on these strengths. The findings suggest that there is not a single solution to the above obstacles, and that using a variety of different strategies can help to discover what works best for the individuals attending the centre. Furthermore, it is important to ask participants and families in the surrounding neighbourhood about their own needs and about what they feel would be successful ways of meeting these needs. This provides them with a sense of empowerment, ownership, confidence, and inclusiveness that fosters a strong sense of community and a willingness to participate. The importance of building partnerships with other community agencies in order to provide families with a broader array of

resources is also emphasized. Therefore, a systemic approach is needed, in which change takes place at the individual, family, and community level.

All of the OEYC agencies that were interviewed experienced similar difficulties and concerns, and stated that these issues are faced continually, and are not always resolved. Therefore, the struggle to meet the needs of the community is not a unique issue faced by the Jane-Finch OEYC. However, it is clear through discussion with the various OEYC managers, that they share a strong sense of hope, a belief that challenges can be overcome, a sense of pride in their staff, and a commitment to persist in their attempts to produce change, in spite of the adversities they face. Maintaining this positive, warm, and encouraging environment is also a fundamental aspect of growth and development.

7. References

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