Constructing Measures of Northern Children's Identity through Dialogue

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Abstract

The many relationships and experiences in a child's early years exert an influence that may last a lifetime. A picture of child development is more complete with a perspective on the child's sense of identity. Child development can be described, measured, or put in context. It can be looked at in a quantitative fashion, through tests and numbers, and it can be narrated through a story. Ongoing dialogue within the Northwest Territories led to the construction and refinement of relevant and measurable indicators of young children's sense of identity as reflected in their northern and Aboriginal cultures and contexts. A sense of belonging, with relational connections to self, family, culture, community, and place contribute to the construction of northern children's identities. This article describes the emergence of those constructs and the relationship-based processes that gradually led to the construction of the Sense of Identity (SI) questionnaire.

Key words: Aboriginal, culture, early childhood development, Early Development Instrument (EDI), Identity, belonging, kindergarten

Introduction

Children's early experiences have a long reach (McCain et al., 2007). The longstanding debate about whether human beings are products of nature or nurture has ended. Research confirms that experience (nurture) and genes (nature) interact to shape human development; the associated relationships, interactions, and experiences in the early years establish the brain's ability to form neural circuitry (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Thus, children's lived experiences in the early years significantly affect physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. Parameters for basic structures of brain development are set by genes but brain architecture is actually established as a child experiences the world in which they learn and grow.

Developmental health is affected by converging influences in the first five years of life. The many relationships and experiences in a child's early years have lifelong impacts on individuals, families, communities, and ultimately society as a whole. A compilation of research evidence supports findings that children's developmental health as they enter formal schooling is predictive of health and wellness outcomes, academic achievement, employment, and involvement with the justice system over the lifecourse (e.g., Moffit et al., 2011).

The Total Environment Assessment Model of ECD

In 2007, the Social Determinants of Health Committee of the World Health Organization (WHO) presented the Total Environment Assessment Model of Early Childhood Development (TEAM: ECD, Irwin et al.,

2007). The TEAM: ECD model provides a lens to explore the dynamic and interconnected nature of children's early environments. Building on social environmental and ecological system models of development perspectives, TEAM: ECD includes temporal components, the authors arguing historical timeframe matters. What is needed in a community in 2012 is situated in the current time, and therefore cannot be the same as what was needed 20 years ago or will be needed 20 years from now (see Figure 1 for an adapted version of the TEAM:ECD from one of the co-creators, Dr. Clyde Hertzman).

Figure 1.
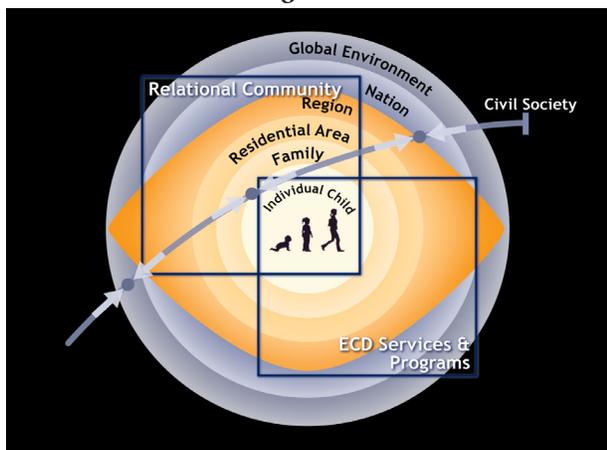
Source: Dr. Clyde Hertzman, Director of the Human Early Learning Partnership at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Hertzman is a member of The Social Determinants of Health Committee of the World Health Organization (WHO).

TEAM: ECD interconnects multiple frames of influence. For example, the relational community sphere overlaps the child, family, residential, and national frames of influence on children's lives and is also interrelated to ECD programs and services universally available to children and families. The relational community "is a primary influence on how children identify themselves and others and how outsiders identify children. Therefore, it is a primary source of social inclusion and exclusion; sense of self and self-worth; self-esteem and gender socialization" (Irwin et al., 2007, p. 26). Measurement and monitoring of children's developmental health at a population level constitutes one of the cogs in the wheel that helps us understand what shapes children into healthy adults contributing to a civil society (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge

Center [ECLKC], 2009). Indicators based on child development can be linked to information on children's early experiences, environments, and circumstances, enabling a holistic story of development and acknowledging reciprocal relationships between children and the contexts in which they grow up.

The Early Development Instrument

The Early Development Instrument (EDI, Janus and Offord, 2007), a measure of children's developmental health at school entry, was designed within the parameters of the science of early childhood development, with the specific purpose of providing an indicator of child well-being that could be interpreted within the context of a child's life. The EDI assesses the outcomes of children's first five years of life as they are reflected in competencies and skills contributing to their developmental health at school entry. The EDI is an observational measure, completed by kindergarten teachers, several months into the school year, to allow the teacher ample time to get to know the child well. It covers five major developmental areas (See Figure 2). The 104 items of the EDI consist of easily observable and developmentally based items.

Figure 2: The Five Developmental Domains Measured by the Early Development Instrument.
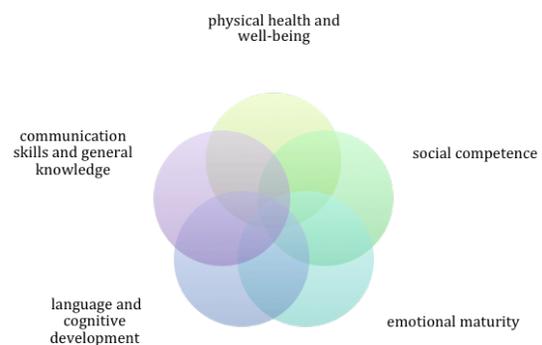
Much work has gone into ensuring that the EDI items are acceptable to the entire Canadian population (Janus et al., 2007) in terms of the language and sensitivity as well as addressing relevant contextual factors as much as possible within the questionnaire, or within the project in which the instrument is used. Since the main mode of EDI implementation is monitoring of children's developmental

health at school entry, a section at the end of the questionnaire is included to gauge children's experiences prior to school. In some provinces, companion instruments are sent home to parents to provide more detailed information on children's lives prior to kindergarten. For example, the children's native language is captured as part of the demographic data collected. In 2000, a community in Saskatchewan, participating in the Understanding the Early Years (UEY) project, requested the information on children's Aboriginal status be added to the demographic variables collected with the EDI. After consultation with other users of the EDI at that time, this information was added on a permanent basis. The formulation of the item was modeled on the Statistics Canada Census question. Soon after, several other countries, most notably Australia, expressed interest in using the EDI. An Australian team conducted validation studies with immigrant cultures and with the Indigenous populations in collaboration with Indigenous researchers (Silburn et al., 2009). An enhanced EDI Guide for teachers resulted from the Australian validation studies which minimized cultural bias while maximizing cultural relevance, appropriateness, and sensitivity. The need for balance between establishing universal indicators of child development and sensitivity to local context and culture emerged.

Since early 2000, the EDI has been used in many communities across Canada to provide a snapshot of children's well-being (Janus and Offord 2007). British Columbia and Manitoba were the first to provide province-wide funding for population-based implementation of the EDI with all kindergarten children, followed closely by Ontario. As of 2012, almost all of Canada's thirteen provinces and territories have implemented the EDI and used the results to create new or enhance existing efforts to promote the importance of early child development and improve its outcomes (see Figure 3).

Measuring Beyond Developmental Domains

Multiple interdependent spheres of influence, including social, economic, and cultural factors, interact to influence children's development (Irwin et

Figure 3: Offord Centre
EDI Implementations in Canada, 2000 to 2012
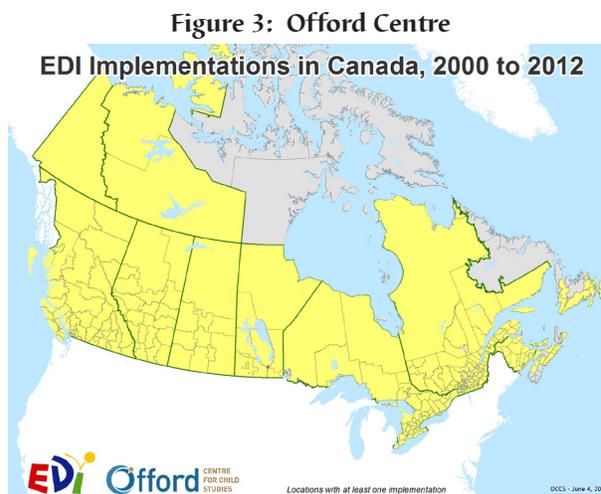
al., 2007). A picture of child development is more complete with deeper understandings of a child's relational community and interrelated sense of identity. The Latin origin of the word identity was "idem" meaning "the same." Today identity is often used to describe a sense of commonality, unity, or resonance with others in some specific way. Yet, the term identity has many definitions and is perceived differently across cultures. For example, Tłįchǫ cosmology research led by John B. Zoe, involving elders and Tłįchǫ people of all ages, associated Tłįchǫ identity with five relationships strengthened and reinforced through the practice of five values (Martin and Wedzin, 2010).[1]

The way children process and perceive the world is constructed through their culture (Ball, 2008). Children enter kindergarten with varied cultural, social, and linguistic identities that have organized their thinking process (Rushton and Larkin, 2001). Some cultures perceive the world more holistically, emphasizing the interrelatedness of all things; other cultures perceive the world more analytically, dividing what they observe into individual parts (Ireland, 2009). Identity formation is both a uniquely individual and a collectively constructed process through social interaction (Peacock and Greene, 2007) and experienced over time (Schilling and Kozin, 2009).

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[1] The five Tłįchǫ identity model relationships are (a) with the land; (b) with one's own inner spirit; (c) with the family and extended family; (d) with the community; and (e) with other governments, businesses. The Tłįchǫ identity is strengthened through the continual practice of five values. The five values are (a) respect for the land, Tłįchǫ language, culture, and way of life; (b) independence and self-reliance; (c) peace, reconciliation, and the healing of broken relationships; (d) caring and concern for others; and (e) survival through adaptability (Martin and Wedzin, 2010).

Attempting to create a measure of a complex, culturally situated construct such as a child's sense of identity raises many questions. A researcher's lived experiences unavoidably shape her worldview and therefore the research process. The obligation of the researcher is to assume a reflexive sensitivity to all sources of bias and to be cognizant that cultural identities and worldviews of researchers, despite every effort made, influence perspectives (Mays and Pope, 2000). In particular, the disparity between the epistemologies of Indigenous peoples and conventional positivist psychology (Sam, 2011) must be recognized. Many Western methods of measurement and analysis are Eurocentric by design (Battiste, 2002), negate cultural identities, and produce misleading findings (Barnhart, 2008; Gould, 2008). Research in Indigenous communities must respect and adhere to the principles, values, and beliefs of the people, honouring the validity of the culture's "ethical space" (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], 2007, p. 17) over Western practices. Wilson (2008) presented an Indigenous research paradigm based on an Indigenous ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology. Relationality accountability includes beliefs in the interconnectedness of all living things and carries a relationship-based accountability for values and methodology on the part of researchers (Wilson, 2008).

Discussing Identity

In early 2011, the Government of the Northwest Territories (NWT) expressed interest in using the EDI to measure and monitor the development health of NWT children and approached the Offord Centre for Child Studies (OCCS). In the course of conversations and ensuing collaboration between OCCS and the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) to adapt the contextual sections of the EDI (e.g., capturing 11 official languages of the NWT), an interest in gathering information beyond the set of standard developmental components of the EDI emerged. During informal meetings in August 2011, representatives of several organizations expressed concern that unique values and defining features characterizing northern children could not be fully captured with the core EDI items. In the beginning,

the main priority was to capture the unique cultural strengths of northern Aboriginal children but through dialogue the focus changed to identity and became inclusive of all children.

We, Magdalena and Susan, considered and discussed several possibilities over the period of several months. One option was based on a set of items generated by Magdalena in partnership with the Indigenous Education Coalition from South-West Ontario (First Nations Lifelong Learning Report [FNLLR], 2012). After informal consultations with several Aboriginal educators it became clear that a measure of northern children's identity had to be constructed within the Northwest Territories. Unsure of how to proceed, the focus turned back to the general implementation of the EDI across the NWT in March 2012.

As a part of the first wave of implementation of the EDI, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment organized a 3 day training and professional development session entitled "Re-imagining Kindergarten." This was a one-time-only event for kindergarten teachers to provide training for the EDI implementation and professional development in other kindergarten areas. A range of 60–70 participants were in attendance throughout the 3 days including all kindergarten teachers, student support consultants, representatives of health and social services, educational leaders, early childhood program leaders, and several coordinators and senior level managers from ECE. High-level government and organization representatives also attended the session. The opportunity offered by the presence of almost all NWT personal and official agencies relevant to children's early development was not to be missed. Approximately 40% of the group were Aboriginal with several other cultures represented, including Francophone. Originally the plan was to bring a draft sixth domain measure to this group for consultation, but that did not succeed. As we considered multiple approaches to take during this event, Magdalena came up with an idea that ultimately led to the creation of the Sense of Identity questionnaire. Magdalena suggested shifting the focus onto the kindergarten teachers. Measuring identity raised many questions and was it even possible? The focus

shifted to the question, "What could kindergarten teachers across the Northwest Territories reliably measure in relation to children's sense of identity?"

Susan introduced a 90 minute activity exploring and recording meanings of "identity" in our northern contexts. All attendees were invited to participate alongside colleagues working in the same region. Eight teams of participants, grouped by region, generated over 100 possible items relevant to the identity of a northern child. The intention following this session was for Susan and Magdalena to work through the items gathered. Susan realized that within this group there were Aboriginal leaders whom she knew and had trusting relationships with from almost all regions of the NWT. Within ten minutes a focus group of eight was convened with Magdalena and Susan in a private meeting room. Only one person invited opted not to participate. The group represented six different cultural groups and most worked in high-level leadership roles in their communities.

Six overarching themes emerged from the eight lists: culture, language, communication, activities, pride, and family. Participants in the focus group discussed the relevance of these issues from their experience and understanding, in their identity as the First Nation's persons, as well as professionals deeply involved in well being of young children in NWT. The focus group arrived at a shorter list of categories and items (22) that would provide meaningful information on observable indicators of northern children's sense of identity.

While still at the workshop, 41 teachers were presented with a list of the 22 items, and were asked (through a questionnaire) to respond whether they would be able to answer these for children in their class using "most," "some," "only with parents' help," and "few if any." Several items related to identity could be challenging for teachers to respond to elsewhere, but are less challenging in the NWT which has a culture-based education directive that all teachers are expected to follow. Culture camps for children happen in most schools and teachers, especially those in the remote communities, are encouraged to make connections with the community. The importance of teachers building their cultural competence is valued enough in the NWT that all teachers are required to participate in two days of cultural orientation every year.

Only four of the twenty-two items were reported to be difficult to answer ("few if any" greater than 47%). The full list of twenty-two items was then presented in twelve one-on-one consultations to gather further feedback from a variety of cultural perspectives and in January to two other groups who had requested an EDI presentation. Of the original twenty-two items, three were not included; one was split into two; two were combined for greater clarity with other, similar ones; and one item was added in response to follow-up consultations (see Table 1).

One focus group was particularly significant. This group, like others, began with questioning what the instrument was intended to measure. At the root of this question was a concern about the meaningfulness of what was being measured. "Does the fact child knows cultural foods tell you anything about his identity?" one participant queried in part leading to the division of the whole list into three dimensions of identity: a sense of the community and/or family's culture; a sense of place: the land, local community, and/or the North; and a sense of belonging (see Figure 4).

REFLECTIVE PERSPECTIVES ON THE PROCESS

MAGDALENA

Culture and family values contribute to children's development. As researchers, however, we are rarely equipped with adequate tools to measure their contribution. These tools must be sensitive, relevant, informative, and developed through dialogue. I was so drawn to and enthusiastic about this process. I perceived my role in the development of this instrument to be that of listener and learner. The understanding of the sense of identity of young children, living in the North, and coming from First Nations' heritage, or indeed, a number of others present there, can only be achieved by including diverse voices and perspectives. My own understanding, shaped by my own heritage, experiences, and education, is simply not adequate at this point. However, I bring to this pro-

Table 1. Sense of Identity: From January 2012 version to the Final 2012 Version

January 2012 Version	Final Version February 2012 Possible answers: Yes, Sometimes, No, Don't Know, Not Applicable	Dimension in the Final Version
Can the child name his/her culture? Does the child recognize cultural differences? Does the child wear traditional clothes? Can the child identify one cultural tradition? Is the child involved in cultural traditions? Does the child know local legends? Does the child recognize/know/have traditional foods?	Child can name own culture Child recognizes cultural differences Child wears traditional clothes Child can identify one (or more) cultural tradition(s) Child takes part in cultural practices and traditions Child knows local and/or cultural legends Child recognizes traditional/cultural foods Other	A sense of the community and/or family's culture
Can the child name other communities apart from their own? Does the child know the seasonal activities? Does the child have "on the land" experiences?	Child can name other communities apart from their own Child knows about seasonal activities Child has had "on the land" experiences with the school Child has had "on the land" experiences with family/community Other	A sense of place: The land, local community, and/or the North
Does the child feel that she/he belongs to a culture? Does the child have pride in their culture? Does the child have a traditional name and recognizes it? NEW Does the child demonstrate a sense of family? Does the child demonstrate connection with extended family? Does the child share family stories? Does the child demonstrate knowledge of family stories?	Child feels like they belong to a culture Child demonstrates pride in their culture Child has a traditional name and recognizes it Child demonstrates a connection to the local community Child demonstrates a sense of family Child has relationships and connections to some form of extended family Child knows and shares family stories Other	A sense of belonging
Does the child talk about local legends?	NOT USED (SUBSUMED BY ANOTHER)	
Does the child use facial expressions and/or gestures to communicate?	NOT USED	
Does the child know how to pray?	NOT USED	
Does the child know there is anything they are not allowed to eat?	NOT USED	

Figure 4.

cess my deep commitment to inclusion and cultural awareness in the pan-Canadian project on monitoring children's developmental health at school entry. While I listened and learned from the wisdom of the participants in the larger kindergarten teacher group, and smaller focus groups, I used my research experience to harness the knowledge into a feasible knowledge gathering tool.

Susan

I have been a student of diversity and culture, drawn to understanding the lifeworlds of others, my whole life. My experiences living in diverse contexts among different cultures, has shaped and continues to shape my own identity development and how I see the world. Most recently, as a mom, educator, and community member living in the Tłı̨chǫ community of Behchokö for 7 years my love for the North and interest in northern peoples and cultures has become a significant priority in my life. As an educator for almost 15 years, I have also lived firsthand the power of relationships for strengthening children's resilience. A research study I conducted, exploring

lived experiences of Tłįchǫ high school graduates, showed that the senses of individual and collective identities of participants were resilience enhancing. So when my part of the EDI implementation assignment included developing a sixth measure to capture the unique strengths of northern children, I was intrigued by the possibilities. The draw of gaining deeper understandings of children's identity development and in particular the unique significance of northern children's relationships with others, communities, culture, the land, and North felt like an opportunity to come full circle back to areas of personal interest — identity, relationships, and resilience from diverse cultural perspectives. My understanding that this work must come through relationships and communities has been helpful, and I am continuously seeking the next steps to create a context where these community-based relationships can lead and strengthen this work.

Current Outcomes and Future Plans

Constructing a measure of a northern child's sense of identity and relational community (Irwin et al., 2007) was accomplished in a northern context. This pilot "Sense of identity" (SI) questionnaire was then applied in the spring 2012 implementation of the EDI in the NWT. Several other Canadian communities expressed interest in piloting the SI as an addendum to the EDI in 2013. While we are curious how the outcomes of this new pilot measure would shape our understanding of child development in the northern context, the process of getting there was likely even more valuable than the data. We hope that our experiences in this preliminary phase of our northern dialogues will inspire others to mould and adapt our tool to their own stories and contexts, so that all of us can learn more about the uniqueness of being a young child on the verge of entry to school, through the lenses of their community, cultural, and place-based relationships.

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