

UNDERSTANDING HOW NEIGHBOURHOOD CONTEXT INFLUENCES EARLY DEVELOPMENT

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BACKGROUND

The importance of early experience including the neighbourhood context in shaping children's healthy development is well established. The neighbourhood environment is part of a child's formative early experience and directly impacts developmental outcomes. The current research examines the relationship between neighbourhood context and early development using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

RESEARCH QUESTION

To what extent do children's neighbourhood environments in BC impact their outcomes on the Social Competence and Emotional Maturity domains of the EDI?

METHOD

- All kindergarten aged children from 478 BC neighbourhoods involved in the EDI data collection in the school years 2000-2005.
- 14 children ages 5-7 years from a selected urban neighbourhood

ANALYSES

- A Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) approach to analysis was taken, with individual children (Level 1) being nested within neighbourhoods (Level 2).
- Level 1 variables were gender and age. The original list of Level 2 variables consisted of 92 variables from the 2001 Canadian census. Initially, all Level 2 predictors were included in the model, with statistically non-significant predictors being methodically removed until the remaining set were all significant ($p < .05$). Separate HLM analyses were completed for the Social Competence domain and the Emotional Maturity domain.
- The researcher also spent one year in the neighbourhood interviewing children, parents, care providers and teachers, observing neighbourhood dynamics, play spaces, and children's interactions, and spent time in the

In total, 3 neighbourhood variables were identified as significant Level 2 predictors of EDI outcomes (Table 1).

TABLE ONE: NEIGHBOURHOOD PREDICTORS OF EDI OUTCOMES

NEIGHBOURHOOD CHARACTERISTICS	EDI DOMAIN	
	SOCIAL COMPETENCE	EMOTIONAL MATURITY
Family Structure % lone-parent families	-21.1**	-18.3**
Occupation %of labour force employed in whole sale trade industry	--	2.6**
Employment % males unemployed with children under 6 years	-0.5	-0.8***

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

INTERPRETATION

Interpretation of these variables as predictors of EDI outcomes is guided by a collective socialization framework. Neighbourhoods that embody the characteristics presented in Table 1 are also more likely to have resident families that have moved homes within the past year, have lower incomes, do not own their home, are first generation Canadians, have immigrant status, and speak a non-official language in the home. While speculative, it may be reasonable to assume that as a group, neighbourhoods high in these characteristics may be less able to collectively mobilize to gain access to good childcare facilities, schools, and outdoor play spaces within their communities (see photographs). In addition, the adults within these communities may be more likely to experience stressors around provision of basic needs. Thus, promoting the development of children's social and emotional health may be less of a focus, and there may be fewer role models and resources on



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which to base such promotion. While this quantitative analysis provides definitive evidence of the connection between early social and emotional development and neighbourhood context, the nature of the data did not allow a more in-depth perspective. The qualitative portion of our research addressed this limitation.

Through the eyes of a young child we see...

- threats to their safety
- limited free range of play
- experiences with bullies

"Outside, I don't go outside. I'm not twenty-five you know"

-Merya

Parents spoke of not belonging in their neighbourhoods and the lack of safety and social trust in their neighbourhoods.

"A man with a knife lives in my neighbourhood, he wears black"

-Michelle

"A man was beat up in my alley by six guys the other night"

-Sarah

"I don't have neighbours"

-Angel

"There are no parks in my neighbourhood"

-Annie

"The bullies wreck stuff I make"



"My Neighbourhood"

DISCUSSION

While we are better able to describe specific characteristics of neighbourhoods that are statistically linked to developmental outcomes, the literature remains inadequate in the use of mixed methods approaches. This research demonstrates the utility of combining complex modelling with observations of families and children as they interact in their environments.

Through analysis we know that:

- issues such as safety, lack of cohesion, the signs of social disorder, lack of role models, and more, can effectively enter the consciousness of children and impact their social and emotional health on a daily basis.
- children who live in neighbourhoods where adults have limited access to resources – both financial and psychosocial in nature – will be more limited in their social and emotional development
- children living in these neighbourhoods may have had limited developmentally supportive interactions with their neighbourhood environment.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative research here highlighted the importance of neighbourhood contexts in shaping children's social and emotional health in particular ways.

An increased understanding of this relationship positions us to better address the neighbourhood-level inequities faced by children in our province.



Playground Garbage