REPORT TO
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING
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COMMUNITIES AND COMPREHENSIVE CHILD DEVELOPMENT MONITORING: *PROGRESS AND PRIORITIES FOR 2017*

FINAL REPORT

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COMMUNITIES AND COMPREHENSIVE CHILD DEVELOPMENT MONITORING 1

This section provides an overview of a comprehensive child development monitoring system, the components of such a system and the interest of schools and communities in Victoria.

1.1 What is a comprehensive child development monitoring system

Comprehensive child development monitoring seeks to systematically capture and connect knowledge about children and young people's development at key points in their lives.

The importance for communities is to understand whether children are making progress and whether efforts and supports are in place to promote children's development as they grow up. It recognises that early developmental progress underpins later adolescent development and the important interplay of child development with family and community environments.

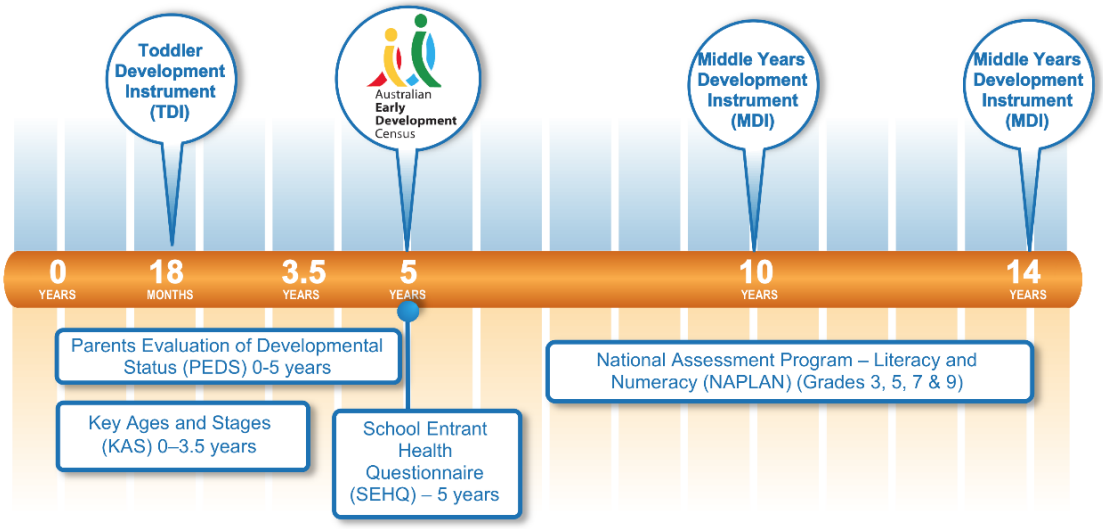
A comprehensive child development monitoring system for children has been established by the Pan Canadian Forum for Early Child Development Monitoring, whose goal is to identify differences in child development outcomes across place and track trends over time and to identify social, cultural, socio-economic and political factors that are associated with high levels of health and wellbeing.

Comprehensive child development monitoring provides a whole picture of the developing child. An important aspect of the design is to capture the parent, teacher and child voice at key points. This reflects key influences in a child's life, including children's emerging agency over their own lives.

1.2 Comprehensive child developmental monitoring components

The monitoring of child development over the early life course, aligned to current data sources, is represented in Figure 1.1 below. This includes an emerging Toddler Development Instrument (at 18 months of age), the Australian Early Development Census at entry to school and the Middle Years Development Instrument (at 10 to 14 years of age). Together these three universal monitoring tools provide a core mechanism to understand development in the early course of children's lives.

FIGURE 1.1 COMPREHENSIVE CHILD DEVELOPMENT MONITORING



SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN 2016

In brief, these tools are:

— the *Toddler Development Instrument* (TDI) – the TDI is a parent-completed questionnaire about 18 month old children. The questionnaire collects information about contextual family and community processes, resources and barriers.

— the *Australian Early Development Census* (AEDC) – the AEDC is a teacher-completed questionnaire undertaken for all children in the first year of school. The questionnaire collects information about children's development in five domains.

— the *Middle Years Development Instrument* (MDI) – the MDI is a survey for children and young people aged 10 to 14 on non-academic factors relevant to learning and participation.

These population-level monitoring tools measure developmental change and trends over time in populations or groups of children. The combination of these three monitoring points provides communities and policy makers with comprehensive data from which to understand and monitor children's circumstances across a trajectory from 18 months to 14 years.

1.3 Schools and communities leading

In Victoria, the AEDC project has led the collection and use of AEDC as part of triennial national collections in 2009, 2012 and 2015 (a 4th wave of data collection will take place in 2018). The AEDC has been vital in raising the understanding and importance of children's development across schools and communities.

Through discussion and consideration of change over time in AEDC findings there is an important opportunity to raise stakeholder awareness of valuable longitudinal data which can be linked to other local complementary data therefore enabling a deeper understanding of the role of parental time, income, human, psychological and social capital and factors that contribute to variation in patterns and predictors of later life outcomes.

The AEDC project, alongside the Principal Investigators from Canada, have been working with schools and agencies who deliver services at a local level to trial the development and use of additional monitoring components – the Toddler Development Instrument (at 18/months) in 2015 and the Middle Years Development Instrument (10-14 years old) in 2016.

The TDI meets a gap in knowledge, research has demonstrated that context is the most predictive of life outcomes, and that needs to be captured early in life. This data is sought to provide a better understanding of the lives and circumstances in which children live – this data is predictive of poorer outcomes – enhancing the value of having AEDC data at the neighbourhood level.

The MDI provides the opportunity to look beyond the AEDC by engaging with those stakeholders who see an opportunity to understand the development of children into the middle years of childhood. This interest particularly follows the release of the 2015 AEDC in which there is a decline in social and emotional wellbeing. Schools and communities are interested in how children and young people are tracking and building strong social capital within their local context to improve outcomes and enhance resilience.

The model here is a community-based, participatory paradigm which has the community at the centre, but also enables the strengths of government assistance and the expertise of researchers. It involves all partners in the process and builds on unique strengths to mobilise knowledge and effort.

PROGESSING THE TDI AND MDI IN VICTORIA 2

This section provides an overview of progress with the development of the TDI and MDI in Victoria. It reflects two workshop discussions held 13 December with stakeholders.

2.1 TDI progress and priorities

The Toddler Development Instrument (TDI) responds to a clear gap in our monitoring of key influences on children's development before school.

While there is strong research demonstrating that the family, home and community environments significantly influence children's lives and that context is the most predictive of life outcomes Victoria lacks a consistent and reliable means to capture this data early in life. The value of the TDI is that it provides a measure to meet that gap in knowledge so that effective intervention strategies can be implemented at a population level in the years before school.

2.1.1 Feasibility testing in Victoria

The TDI was developed by the Forum for Early Child Development Monitoring and the Human Early Learning Partnership, University of British Columbia. It is being trialled in British Columbia, Canada.

During November-December 2015 it's feasibility for implementation in Victoria was investigated in two communities – Frankston and Warrnambool.

The feasibility study undertaken in these two communities sought to understand applicability of the TDI in an Australian context and options in which to deliver the questionnaire. The feasibility study showed that it is possible to implement the TDI as a population measure by integrating it into the Maternal and Child Health Service 18 month Key Age and Stage visit with relative ease.

The feasibility study was also important because it showed that implementing the TDI on a larger scale (e.g. through a pilot) will require a close working relationship between DET and the participating LGAs in order to design and implement a system that is both effective and pragmatic.

2.1.2 Workshop discussion

A roundtable workshop was undertaken in late December 2016 to discuss opportunities for a TDI trial in Victoria and future opportunities for progressive implementation of a comprehensive child development monitoring system.

The workshop was coordinated by the Victorian Department of Education and Training and brought together Dr Martin Guhn from the Human Early Learning Partnership (University of British Columbia, Canada), government, local experts in infant and child development, and authorities on participatory community development and data collection.

Overview of the TDI and current progress

The workshop started with an overview of the TDI, initially covering the genesis of the TDI in Canada as an integral part of a comprehensive child development monitoring system, and progress to date, which included an update on current pilots of the TDI in Canada.

The value of the TDI to meet a broader need was discussed; the importance of understanding rising levels of social-emotional vulnerability in children and that character and behaviour development occurs early in life. A key value of the TDI is that it is both developmentally informed (i.e. it has an early life focus) and contextually oriented (i.e. considers the environments in which children are raised).

A community framework for piloting the TDI

Discussion then turned to current opportunities to initiate a pilot of the TDI across Victorian communities. An emerging opportunity is to pilot the TDI through a community participatory-based research model, such as the Communities that Care methodology.

While the TDI data collection would be a primary focus for pilot sites, the approach would mean that the TDI data collection would be set in place, in the community context. This enables TDI data to be linked with other data and ultimately support collaborative community action. A key reflection from participants was that sustainable data collections depend on communities valuing the data and seeing the difference it makes.

The approach would be supported by community development expertise and guidance in child development monitoring. In addition, communities are encouraged to draw on a menu of evidence based practices.

It was recognised that many communities are already having these conversations, and the TDI data can assist in these discussions. Local governments are particularly important stakeholders.

Implementation method and planning for TDI pilots

Participants then discussed a more specific implementation method for a TDI pilot in Victoria.

In this regard, the 2015 TDI feasibility study provides strong direction. This study highlighted successes and challenges of different implementation approaches and recommendations for future roll-out. The recommended implementation approach is through MCH nurses and local government. Importantly in the feasibility study, while MCH nurses didn't initially express interest in training, they ultimately recommended this be undertaken.

The steps for undertaking such a pilot include:

1. Funding – including data collection requirements and professional development
2. Community engagement and training – Local governments and MCH nurses will be a priority
3. Implementation – data collection by MCH nurses using the practices and learnings developed through the feasibility study and the experiences from Canada
4. Connecting data – develop a data picture connecting TDI data with current community data.
5. Planning for action – supporting communities to choose and apply evidence based strategies for action.

The ambition is to conduct a first round of piloting the TDI, ideally up to step 5 above, by the end of 2018.

The first step requires the development of a project proposal. This proposal will specify the need, implementation approach, resource requirements and timing. It should also reflect the expertise available within a community and those partners with broader child development and research expertise. Dr Guhn would be a core part of the team given his role in developing the TDI and its piloting in Canada.

This proposal is an important foundation for engaging philanthropic partners. It will also be important in specifying the roles and expectations of different partners contributing to the work.

2.2 MDI progress and priorities

The MDI is a survey for children and young people aged 10 to 14 which captures non-academic factors relevant to learning and participation. It is based on the recognition that the time between 10 to 14 years of age marks a distinctive period in human development.

The tool is designed to provide schools, communities, researchers and policy makers with much needed information about the psychological and social worlds of children. Importantly, it gives children a voice and an opportunity to communicate to adults about what their experiences are inside and outside of school.

2.2.1 Experience in Victoria

Schools and communities in Victoria have used data extensively in their planning for over a decade. While learning outcomes and student opinion surveys have been a central point of reference, data has been limited on children and young peoples' social and emotional development, perseverance, engagement, physical health and wellbeing, relationships and connectedness with others, and experiences at school and activities outside of school.

To address these limitations, Victorian schools have expressed increasing interest in the MDI. In 2014, nine Victorian schools participated in the MDI. In 2015, 25 Victorian schools participated.

At a forum in mid-2016, participating schools highlighted the following strengths of the MDI:

— *It's a fit for purpose design* – the MDI is derived from evidence-based research. It is designed around positive outcomes for children and young people, and uses an ecological approach considering the personal, school, and broader worlds of children and young people.

— *It fills a gap for schools and communities* – in particular recognition of the scarcity of this information for Victorian schools. The MDI helps to explain the causes of a school's health and well-being results, including factors within the broader community.

— *It engages students and provides unique student insights* – schools highlighted the benefits of seeking student voice and the increased insights and engagement when students know their school is interested in them.

— *Implementation is school friendly* – schools have flexibility to undertake the MDI when it suits them within a multi-week window in which the survey is open. This makes the completion logistically easier, relative to large scale surveys or tests which all students complete at one time.

— *It is useful for both large and small schools* – large schools reported substantial value in understanding the diversity of students within the school. Smaller schools, which often lack resources, saw the MDI as an opportunity to build community partnerships based on clear data about students.

— *MDI data leads to change* – the key message is that the MDI data is a catalyst for change. Previous participants described that the results highlight clear areas for development and reveal information that is surprising and challenging.

2.2.2 Workshop discussion

A roundtable workshop was undertaken in late December 2016 to discuss experiences with the 2016 MDI collection and opportunities for further engagement in 2017.

The workshop was coordinated by the Victorian Department of Education and Training and brought together the MDI lead data collection body (Social Research Centre), school principals, community stakeholders, government representatives and Dr Martin Guhn from the Human Early Learning Partnership (University of British Columbia, Canada).

Schools undertaking the MDI in 2016

The workshop started with an overview of the MDI collection in 2016 and the number of schools participating to date. In total, 68 schools and 5,411 children participated in the collection. This represented 91 per cent of eligible children. There were 2,679 secondary school (years 7 and 8) completions and 2,200 primary school completions (years 5 and 6).

Feedback from 2016 implementation

The Social Research Centre collected feedback from schools on implementation processes. The feedback was largely positive, with the main area for improvement being a preference for the collection to take place in term 2 or 3, rather than term 4.

Feedback from school and community participants at the workshop, reinforced many positive earlier findings (as discussed in section 2.2.1 above), including:

— *Implementation was smooth* – participating schools reflected that the implementation process had been smooth and they felt well-supported by the Social Research Centre, though noting a preference that the collection is not conducted in term 4 in 2017.

— *The value of student voice and engagement* – schools commented on the importance of student voice and that the MDI was a systematic and structured approach to this. Also that it had prompted classroom discussions and engagement among students.

— *It fills a gap* – the limitations of the current school surveys in providing insights for schools were reiterated. One school reported, "*Our student opinion survey says everything's ok but when you talk to our 5, 6 year students they tell us they're not as happy. So we're looking forward to what the MDI can tell us, as we're struggling to understand the disconnect between data and observations. "*

— *Benefits for connecting with other schools and the broader community* – in addition, schools felt that the MDI connects them to the community because it reflects student experiences beyond the school gate.

Some participants raised that the cost, although small, may not be sustainable on a year to year basis for schools. Others noted that they considered the data a priority for their school and that there was imperative to do this. Community participants suggested that it may be worthwhile talking to other community stakeholders, as the data had broad value and they may be able to assist with costs.

Nature of the survey and links to comprehensive child development monitoring

Schools and communities also discussed ways to maximise interpretation and use of the data.

This included how the design of the MDI was linked to child development. Dr Guhn discussed the basis of the survey's development domains.

In particular, the design recognises significant research about these five domains or 'assets' as both important for children and young people's development and modifiable through action. Evidence indicates that children or young people that have fewer 'assets' have worse health and well-being outcomes, and a clear linear association of more 'assets' to better outcomes.

The opportunity to link the data across a child's development was seen as critically important. Dr Guhn discussed the evolution of Canada's comprehensive child development monitoring system, commencing with the AEDC and progressively addressing gaps in the monitoring of children and young people's development. Australia is seen to be a few years ahead in progressing the AEDC and MDI collections, and noted Victorian progress in linking AEDC and NAPLAN data.

Dr Guhn identified that the requirements are now in place for linking population data collections (AEDC and MDI) but resources are an ongoing constraint. In addition, he highlighted the opportunity to extend this in Victoria to the years before school – building off Victoria's unique MCH universal platform.

Reporting of 2016 school MDI data

Having recently completed the collection, schools were highly interested in the availability of school reports. The data reports are quick to generate and were expected to be available in January 2017. There will be two reports, one for a school's primary school aged student survey completions, and one for a school's secondary school aged student survey completions.

Given the nature of the collection it was agreed that the comparator for schools would be all schools in the collection. This would be the priority. The Social Research Centre indicated that it is also suitable to generate reports with clusters or communities of schools as a comparator.

MDI priorities for 2017

School MDI data reports are expected to be provided to schools in January 2017. Around this time, the DET will conduct a teleconference for all participating school, regional and community stakeholders to discuss the findings, process and reporting.

It was suggested that an MDI forum should be convened around March 2017. This would be beneficial to capture feedback from schools and communities about the MDI 2016 school data reports and their translation into action. In addition, developers of the MDI from the Human Early Learning Partnership (University of British Columbia, Canada) are anticipated to be in Melbourne. This would provide an opportunity to hear about progress in Canada.

Schools are highly interested in case studies about different responses to the MDI data. The forum would be an opportunity to collect such case studies for broader dissemination.

This forum is also a natural point for planning the 2017 collection, recognising schools' preference that the collection occur in term 2 or 3.

GROWING MOMENTUM IN 2017 3

Communities and schools have been instrumental in progressing a better understanding of children and young people's development. This effort, combined with research expertise and the support of government, has contributed to substantial progress towards a comprehensive child development monitoring approach. This progress and recent workshop discussions provide significant momentum for action in 2017 and beyond.

3.1 Why comprehensive child development monitoring works for schools and communities

Together the AEDC, TDI and MDI provide a core mechanism to understand development in the early course of children's lives.

There are many positive reports about the benefits of these tools in their own right. Most typically though, they raise a number of fundamental questions about the data being reported: *Why is this the case? What can we do about it? How will we know if our efforts are making a difference?*

A comprehensive child development monitoring approach, where questionnaires can be repeated consistently over time, helps communities and schools answer these questions. The approach enables schools and communities to gain insights into how children are faring as identified by the important people in their lives – the parents, teachers, and children and young people themselves.

3.2 Combining expertise in research, monitoring and intervention

The greatest gains from a comprehensive child development monitoring system will come from effort of communities, with combined support from researchers, data collection expertise and government.

Communities and schools are the focal point for engagement with children and families. Enabling partners include:

— *Researchers* – researchers bring guidance in child development and questionnaire design, and give funding providers confidence that efforts are appropriate and meaningful

— *Data collection expertise* – data collection is a key point at the intersection of communities with children and families, and it's critical that this is positive, professional and efficient

— *Government* – government departments are custodians of data at key points in children's lives and can provide a linking role in joining-up and/or sharing practice across communities.

The combined strengths of partners provide the foundation for substantial gains to be achieved in the development of children and young people.

3.3 Priorities for 2017 and beyond

Victoria's schools and communities in Victoria have made a great deal of progress towards comprehensive child development monitoring for understanding the development of children and young people. However, it is important that the momentum is sustained in 2017.

Priorities for progressing the TDI in 2017 are:

— Development of a project proposal to specific requirements for TDI pilot collections in a community participatory research based model

— Engaging key partners and funding bodies in agreeing and moving forward with the TDI pilots in selected communities.

The priorities for progressing the MDI in 2017 are:

— School MDI data reports to be provided to schools in January 2017

— An MDI forum to be convened for early to mid-2017 with a focus on translation of MDI data into action, progress in Canada and initiating planning the 2017 MDI collection.

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