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Supporting Children and Families

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This professional publication serves as a vehicle for raising the profile of and thereby gaining recognition for the important research and development work which is being conducted currently in Canada.

Research Connections Canada includes research and/or development papers as well as background papers, analytical literature reviews and essays. This publication series is of particular interest to training programs (at both college and university levels), academics, researchers, policy makers and licensing and regulatory agencies.

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The Contribution of Indigenous Heritage Language Immersion Programs to Healthy Early Childhood Development

By Onowa Mclvor

Onowa Mclvor is an Indigenous researcher who recently completed her M.A. in Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria.

Introduction

Indigenous heritage language programs can make a significant contribution to healthy Aboriginal early childhood and community development. Two B.C. First Nations communities operating such programs were visited and took part in a research study on the viability of starting and operating such programs to revitalize the language and contribute to Aboriginal culturally specific early childhood development. The findings,

combined with a literature review, yielded practical recommendations and possibilities for future action for other communities, licensing bodies, training programs and funders.

Definitions

- “The language” is used throughout to signify a child’s heritage or ancestral language.
- “Language nest” programs are immersion preschool child care programs conducted entirely in the heritage language of an Indigenous group.

Making a Case for Early Childhood

Early childhood is widely known to be an informative and critical time for identity formation. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples¹ described early childhood as the foundation on “which identity, self-worth, intellectual and strengths are built.” Knowing

one's ancestral language is essential to positive cultural identity development.²⁻⁴ Children acquire pride and confidence in cultural identity, have an increased sense of self-esteem and gain security in knowing their heritage and culture.^{5,6}

In addition, knowing the language of one's ancestors greatly contributes to a sense of belonging⁷⁻¹¹ and a connectedness to one's primary group offers stability for coping with adult responsibilities later in life.¹² Furthermore, by immersing children in Indigenous language, a negative impact on self-identity and self-image can be reversed.¹³ This is an important strategy to develop resiliency in Aboriginal children who may face racism and other disadvantages of being Aboriginal in a colonial society.

Language also carries cultural values¹⁴; therefore, children learn the values of their culture largely by learning the language.¹⁵ Values are well known to be a major force in shaping self-awareness, identity and interpersonal relationships that maintain an individual's level of self-assurance and success later in life.¹⁶

First Nations History of Language Loss in Canada

Prior to contact, Aboriginal languages flourished. Aboriginal children learned their ancestral language effortlessly by being exposed to, spoken to and naturally immersed in the language. However, due to widespread language loss in Aboriginal communities, many Aboriginal parents cannot raise their children in the language.

Although many factors contributed to Indigenous language loss, the two most damaging and impacting policies nationally were the reserve system and the public school system. However, it is important to recognize that in the B.C. context, the banning of potlatches also greatly affected intergenerational language transference, as such ceremonies were an important vessel for passing down values and oral histories in the language.¹⁷

The link of the language to land is unmistakable. Indigenous languages are intertwined with nature, as literal translations of various words indicate. For example, the Cree word for thunder, *pîyisowak*, literally means the thunder beings are calling out to each other¹⁸ rather than an implication of a scientific description of how thunder occurs as in the English language. The continued loss of land imposed on First Nations communities through colonization practices of settlement and treaties, and the destruction of traditional habitat have also eroded First Nations language use.^{19,20}

In addition, the residential and day school system that children were legally forced to attend largely forbade the use of Indigenous language.²¹⁻²³ Many examples are available of the

colonial policies created and enforced in Canada and the United States. The US Federal Superintendent of Indian Affairs in 1895 argued, “If it were possible to gather in all the Indian children and retain them for a certain period, there would be produced a generation of English-speaking Indians, accustomed to the ways of civilized life....”²⁴ Many children were punished and publicly humiliated for speaking their language in residential schools.^{25, 26} First Nations people across Canada have given testimony of tactics used to extinguish the language from their tongues. One Tlingit man commented, “Whenever I speak Tlingit, I can still taste the soap.”²⁷ It is no wonder that language recall and regeneration of use for some First Nations people is so difficult.

Effects of Language Loss

Language is the main link to identity, both personal and collective.²⁸ Although it is not always a person’s first language, there is an inherent emotional and spiritual connection between the mind, body and soul of a person and the person’s ancestral tongue.^{29, 30} Language is also often recognized as one of the most tangible symbols of culture and group identity^{31–33} and the main vehicle for cultural transference.^{34, 35} Without the language of one’s ancestors, individual and collective identity becomes weakened and it is likely that the culture would die out within a few generations. Dr. Burt McKay, Nisga’a language teacher and Elder quoted by the First Peoples’ Cultural Foundation,³⁶ explained: “In our language, it is embedded, our philosophy of life and our technologies. There is a reason why we want our languages preserved and taught to our children – it is our survival.”

Language is the repository of a people’s history. It is their identity; it carries with it oral history, songs, stories and ritual, and offers a unique view of the world.³⁷ As conveyed by a group of Indigenous language preservationists, “songs will no longer have words, no one will speak the proper words when sending off the spirits and there will be no one to say or understand prayers for ceremonies.”³⁸ Language expresses a way of life, a way of thought, an expression of human experience like no other^{39–43} and a connection to the land. As illustrated by one Elder in the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples:⁴⁴

Does it confuse you when I refer to animals as people? In my language it is not confusing...we consider both animals and people to be living beings...when my people see a creature in the distance they say: Awiiyak (someone is there). It is not that my people fail to distinguish animals from people. Rather, they address them with equal respect. Once they are near and [identifiable]... then they use their particular name.

The cultural, spiritual, intellectual, historical and ecological knowledges of one’s ancestors are irrevocably lost when this world view vanishes.^{45–49} Examples of this knowledge include prayers, songs, ceremonies, teachings, styles of humour, ways of relating and kinship

structures. Recounting all that is lost when a language dies helps to realize the damage done and project the future losses and effects on Aboriginal people. Clearly, the vitality of Aboriginal languages is closely linked to the health of its people.⁵⁰

Current Context in Canada

Canada's First Nations languages are among the most endangered in the world.⁵¹ All Indigenous languages in Canada are seriously endangered and most are at risk of extinction.⁵²⁻⁵⁴ It is estimated that at the time of contact there were about 450 Aboriginal languages and dialects in Canada belonging to 11 language families.⁵⁵ In the last 100 years alone, at least 10 of Canada's Aboriginal languages have become extinct.⁵⁶ There are now about 50 to 70 Indigenous languages still spoken in Canada.⁵⁷⁻⁶⁰ Only three of these languages (Cree, Inuktitut and Ojibway) are expected to remain and flourish in Aboriginal communities because they have a sufficient population base.⁶¹⁻⁶³

Many linguists agree that the average age of language speakers largely indicates a language's health and predicated longevity. UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*⁶⁴ considers a language endangered if it is not being learned by at least 30 per cent of the children in a community. The 2001 Census⁶⁵ indicated that only 15 per cent of Aboriginal children in Canada are learning their Indigenous mother tongue, a decline from 20 per cent in the 1996 Census. As reported in the census, the number of children in the 0 to 4 age group with an Aboriginal mother tongue dropped from 10.7 to 7.9 per cent between 1986 and 2001.⁶⁶

Making a Case for Early Childhood Immersion Practices

Language Learning

Early childhood has long been acclaimed as the best time for language learning.⁶⁷⁻⁶⁹ The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples⁷⁰ stated that "young children absorb information at a greater rate than at any other stage of life." Up to 3 years of age is a critical time for children to lay the foundation of sound making, and language acquisition is easier for young children.⁷¹ Within months of being born, babies begin to acquire language; by age 5, they master the basic sound system structures and grammar of their native language.^{72,73} There is much debate about "critical" periods in language learning, but the widespread agreement is that the earlier the better.⁷⁴ Norris⁷⁵ conveyed that the younger the speakers the better chance a language has to survive. Therefore, as Fishman⁷⁶ indicated, everything points to the need to focus efforts on getting parents and young children involved in native language renewal.

Bi/multilingualism

Many parents fear that learning their heritage language will detract from their English-language learning. However, children are born ready for bilingualism^{77, 78} and multiple language learning is a common and normal childhood experience.⁷⁹ Tucker⁸⁰ speculated that even more children grow up bilingual or multilingual than monolingual. Crystal⁸¹ further reported that two thirds of children are born into a bilingual environment and develop to be completely competent in both languages.

Parents fearing that heritage language immersion might compromise their child's English skills may be reassured to know that research has shown that literacy skills learned in a mother tongue are readily transferable to a second language.^{82, 83} In addition, there are many advantages and few risks to being bi/multilingual. Bilingual and multilingual individuals have access to a much wider volume of information, tend to have more flexible minds, are more tolerant, and their thought patterns and world view are generally more balanced.⁸⁴ Bilingualism is reported to have no negative effects on an individual's functioning in society.⁸⁵ Cummins⁸⁶ stated that children do not suffer in any way from bilingualism as long as they continue to learn in both languages. His comment further implies that the risk involved can come if neither language is being taught or learned well and the child begins to fall behind in his or her overall language development.

Immersion Practices

Next to the natural option of raising children at home in the language, immersion practices are the most effective method for creating fluent language speakers in a short time period.^{87, 88} It is also widely known that a child's caretaker provides a linguistic model for the child.⁸⁹ It is not that children should not learn language from their parents, but that if they are given the opportunity to attend early childhood heritage language immersion programs, such as language nests, they will have the chance to acquire their heritage language in addition to English at home. Of course, if parents are willing and able to learn alongside their children and reinforce the language at home to the best of their ability, this will only increase the chances for language maintenance beyond the language nest program. However, studies have shown that it is possible for the second language to become the principal language even if parents use a different language.^{90, 91}

The Government of Northwest Territories, which offers extensive support to early childhood immersion programs, reported that it has seen the positive impact that language nests have had on language revitalization.⁹² An additional advantage to immersion programs that communities have noticed is the difference in the ways in which language nest children relate to family and community members as they learn the positive facets of culture, traditional spirituality, and respect for teachers and Elders, in addition to the sounds and phrases of the language.⁹³

Inspiration from Exemplary Models

The Maori have had the most success in revitalizing an Indigenous language, and much of their success has come from Te Kōhango Reo or “language nests” programs.⁹⁴ The program, which began in the early 1980s, is an early childhood total immersion program exclusively using the traditional language as the vehicle for interaction and instruction.^{95–98} Te Kōhango Reo is considered one of the most successful language revitalization models in the world and has been an inspiration to efforts both within Aotearoa and internationally.^{99–101}

Aotearoa is often cited as the model for preschool language immersion that has contributed to the revival of Maori language^{102–104} and it has developed a whole generation of speakers through immersion programming.¹⁰⁵ After hearing about the language nests in Aotearoa, a small group of Indigenous Hawaiian educators and community members set about to create a similar initiative in Hawaii.¹⁰⁶ Due mainly to the success of ‘Aha Pūnana Leo (Hawaiian language nests), Hawaii is now seen as a leader in the United States and abroad as a model and a symbol of hope to other endangered language groups hoping to revitalize their languages.^{107–109} Although they now have K–12 immersion schools and university-level programs in the language, preschools continue to be the foundation of Hawaiian language revitalization.¹¹⁰

Interestingly, both the Maori and Hawaiian language leaders first studied the French immersion model in Canada before embarking on their journeys toward language revitalization.^{111, 112} Canada has had a successful model of immersion programming for nearly 20 years which has contributed greatly toward reviving and continuing the French language in eastern Canada.¹¹³ Krashen¹¹⁴ stated that Canadian French immersion models may be the most successful programs ever recorded in heritage language teaching. Yet, Canadian First Nations have largely looked outside the country to places such as Aotearoa and Hawaii to draw inspiration and bring back ideas about how to revitalize language through immersion.

Research Study Design

Given the important effects of heritage language acquisition on children’s healthy identity development, the devastating effects of language loss, and the critical role that children play in keeping a language alive, the research study explored one possible way to further Indigenous language revitalization strategies, focusing on young children as the critical link.

Two First Nations communities in British Columbia participated in this study, and four key community members associated with the language nest program in each community were

interviewed. In one community, a language nest program was started 16 years ago and ran for a few years until the founders' children became school-aged and their attention turned to elementary-level immersion and beyond. The community has, however, re-established the language nest program in recent years; it is running at full capacity once again with 11 children currently enrolled in the program. The other community started its inaugural language nest program two years ago with a unique approach. It had a one-time fixed intake of 15 children, which reduced to a cohort of nine after the first year. These children are now moving through a four-year program that grows by one grade each year. This community's approach to language nesting began with 3- to 6-year-olds, and this group now spans 5 to 8 years of age.

Results of the Study

A few of the main findings of this study have implications for other communities, early childhood development training programs, licensing bodies and policymakers. The “keeping it simple” finding (described below) helps communities understand that doing a language nest program does not have to be overly complicated.

Language nests often look much like any other child care program but they are run entirely in the heritage language. A finding that may be of interest to early childhood education (ECE) licensing bodies and funders is some of the difficulties that exist when starting and operating these language nest programs according to the rules set out by the government. In addition, ECE training program administrators may be interested in the reported difficulties with training workers for the language nests through mainstream ECE programs.

Keeping the Approach Simple

There is no magic to [the language nest], you don't need to teach the language, just speak it. It is so simple and natural it scares people.

– Administrator, Secwepemc Nation

The leaders of these two language nest programs alluded to keeping it simple in many ways. Participants in both communities conveyed the importance of not making programs more complicated than they needed to be. They encouraged communities to explore and acknowledge the resources that already exist in their communities and to start from there. They discussed the importance of not allowing toys or flashy teaching tools to drown out the Elders and the language. They were aware that overstimulation takes the focus away from the primary aim of traditional language transfer.

One of the two communities was operating more like a primary or ECE classroom. The other community, whose language nest children were younger, has set up a program that was intended to recreate the feel of “Grandma’s house” – very simple without much clutter or distraction.

People can walk in and say “Wow, this is easy, we can find any junky old house and do this out of it.” Exactly! This is what we need to remove the mystery behind creating a language nest because all we’re doing is inviting children over to grandma’s house and speaking the language all day and playing with them. There’s no mystery to that.... We go down to the lake and we play logs and we put rocks on logs and we make those into canoes, we go out into the fields and we play with the flowers and we make flower wreaths and stuff... we don’t need to overcomplicate it. I think that’s what people tend to do. They overcomplicate the whole thing. We forget that children need love and nurturing, they need positive reinforcement, they need acceptance, they need to be safe, they need healthy food. There are real basics that we need to do, we don’t need to worry about too many other things. In a nutshell, that’s what I think a language nest is.

– Administrator, Secwepemc Nation

Hiring and Preparing Teachers

In both communities, the first teachers who started out in the language nest were not fluent speakers but had some background in education. They were matched with Elders who were traditional speakers, and the teachers concentrated their energies on saying very little while in the immersion classroom. This way, the communities combined both the need for the skills and abilities of trained child care and education providers with those of fluent speakers.

I didn’t speak the language at the time, right. I came in just keeping my mouth shut, running around after kids and doing different things. The Elder we hired really didn’t have any idea what to do, so we just said, “Let’s just play with them, let’s just do whatever you do with kids but just all speak the language.” Gradually I picked up more language and the Elder got a little more confident, and that’s how it started. Not a lot of planning when it started, more like a divine inspiration than anything else!

– Administrator, Secwepemc Nation

Members of both communities expressed a need for more traditional speakers who were “qualified” to work with children. They were not speaking about Elders but about ECE or teaching professionals who either spoke the language or were willing to run the program without speaking.

We need another fluent speaker or person who is able to teach. We have many fluent speakers but they don't have the ability to teach.... They were talking about starting another class [new language nest intake] at the beginning of this year, but the issue came up of who's going to teach it. There's no teacher. They need to have a teaching certificate. You can't just pick up a fluent speaker and say that this is a teacher.

– Parent, Lil'wat Nation

Participants in both communities reported that finding a fluent speaker with a teaching or ECE certificate who wanted to teach in the language was one of the main challenges. There were some fluent community members with the relevant credentials (i.e. ECE certificate or B.Ed.) who did not want to teach at the immersion school or language nest and instead chose to teach in mainstream programs. However, most of the community members with these credentials were not traditional language speakers. One community administrator reported that the community members trained in the mainstream ECE programs were not well prepared for either team teaching, or setting up and directing a program without speaking (they had to be silent so they would not contaminate the language nest environment with English). Teachers and administrators reported that these practitioners also often lacked a desire and commitment to learn the language themselves.

ECE Licensing Dilemmas

Participants in both communities reported avoiding formal ECE licensing for the language nest program approach. One of the communities avoided ECE licensing by setting up its program more like a primary elementary school. The other community gained formal ECE licensing approval many years ago when it first attempted a language nest program, but is now running the program on its own authority. During the first attempt, the community had to hire from outside to meet the ECE credentialing requirement and ended up with caregivers who did not speak the language or have a desire to learn it. That first attempt at the language nest eventually folded, partly because ECE licensing regulations did not work for the staffing needs of the program. Therefore, in this community's resurrection of the language nest program it strategically avoided the ECE licensing option. This independent operation was made possible through self-sufficient funding and operating under its own authority.

The licensing bit definitely gets in the way of trying to reach your goals because there are so many hoops that you have to jump through and it takes time. It takes you away from what you want to do and everything takes time. Life goes on and I wasn't ready to go for two years of schooling to do this because I also wanted to get going on an immersion school, which was a whole other venture in itself. The answer is yes, it gets in the way.

– Administrator, Secwepemc Nation

Since reviving the language nest in the last few years, the administrators of this community have discussed putting the teachers through ECE training. However, the teachers already have Bachelor’s degrees in education and one was currently working on a Master’s in Education; therefore, going back to college to attain a one- or two-year entry-level certificate did not make sense. The only other alternative, mentioned sardonically, was to send the traditional speakers (Elders) to get ECE training, but this was seen as an even more ridiculous notion. One community administrator conveyed that it was insulting to suggest that Elders would need training from Euro-western-oriented training programs in order to play with the children of their community.

We need to trust that our Elders know how to play with children and if something is not going well, we’ll talk about it later when the children are not around.

– Community Administrator, Secwepemc Nation

The only clear advantage to the ECE licensing route reported was the funding and subsidy options it provides for parents. However, both communities avoided the formal ECE licensing route because of the difficulties it created for staffing the program – the credentialing requirement that did not accommodate for traditional speakers or a “no English” environment.

Community administrators for the language nests did not report being entirely resistant to the ECE licensing model. They agreed with standards if they were reasonable and certainly wanted to attend to the holistic development needs of their community’s children. They reported being open to having outside visitors come in for such purposes as providing health information sessions, but would require that the presentations and interactions be provided in the traditional language.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Early childhood is a critical time for positive identity formation. The opportunity to learn one’s heritage language clearly contributes to healthy cultural identity formation. However, Aboriginal language use has been decimated over the past century and continues to decline because of many colonization factors and assimilation tactics. The reduction of the use of our languages has had devastating effects on our people. Young children have largely lost the opportunity to learn, through our languages, a unique and traditional way of life, a distinct world view, a window into their history, and a connection to the land of their ancestors and values rooted in traditional ways. The Indigenous language situation in Canada is dire. It is especially alarming in British Columbia because it has the greatest Indigenous language diversity of all the provinces and territories in Canada.

Early childhood has long since been established as the best time for language learning. Next to the best option of learning the language naturally at home, immersion has emerged as the most viable method for gaining true fluency in the language. Among other findings, the two communities that participated in the research provide an inspiration for other communities which may be interested in starting such a program. They help us to understand that it does not have to be complicated and can be done as simply as setting up any other child care program. With this said, there are additional challenges with the ECE licensing model and mainstream training programs in their present form for the language nest programs' start-up and operation. The licensing regulations were not created to suit heritage language immersion programs and mainstream training programs often do not have this type of programming in mind when training workers.

Heritage language programs have been tremendously successful for Indigenous groups in other places in the world, making a distinctive contribution to healthy Aboriginal early childhood development which, of course, eventually leads to healthy nationhood development. This method is beginning to be taken up in Canada in sparse locations. In some cases, it is lack of speakers or fear that stops communities from initiating these programs; in others, it is systemic issues with the ECE system that creates challenges to overcome. However, if there are two things that Aboriginal people are passionate about, it is their community's youngest children and maintaining their language and culture. Therefore, this method should be widely considered and supported by provincial/territorial and federal initiatives aimed at contributing positively to Aboriginal early childhood development and the livelihood of Indigenous nations.

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Talking Points:

What Can Speech-Language Partners Contribute to Aboriginal Early Childhood Development?

By Jessica Ball and Marlene Lewis

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Interview Question: How do you think babies and young children learn to talk?

“They learn to talk by listening to people talk, having a chance to talk, and listening to books with pictures. If they listen and it makes sense you are helping them to learn without really trying, just exposing them to talking.... I know there are some babies who don’t learn to talk at all or don’t talk well. I guess some of them need help....”

– Cree Elder and grandmother who is bilingual in English and Dene

Aboriginal families and communities in Canada are seeking ways to ensure that their own goals for their children’s development are what drive government and agency agendas and determine the allocation of resources for Aboriginal children. This is true for child development services in general, and to Aboriginal children’s language development in particular.

How best to support young children’s speech and language development is a complex and politically sensitive topic for many Aboriginal parents and communities. The goals that Aboriginal parents set for their children vary across a wide spectrum: some want their young children exposed to bilingual and bicultural experiences; some want their toddlers to develop a solid grounding in their Aboriginal mother tongue exclusively before learning

English or French as a second language in primary school or even later; others want their children to develop English first and foremost.

Within the growing field of Aboriginal Early Childhood Development (AECD), there is discussion and debate about these and other language-related issues. But for many Aboriginal parents, particularly those with limited resources, their child's language development is still decided as much by the realities of daily circumstances as by conscious choice or policy. The language support that a child receives depends on who is available to take care of the child and what kind of training that person has. It also depends on the kind of cultural environment the child lives in day to day, and the roles that the parents' and caregivers' own upbringing, health, economic circumstances and stresses have played in shaping their thinking and parenting skills. As the Cree grandmother quoted above points out, some babies don't learn to talk well, and some of them could use some help.

Specialist services provided by speech and language professionals can be one source of support for early language development for Aboriginal children. However, as one of only four self-identified Aboriginal speech and language professionals (out of 5,000 nationwide) has pointed out, most communities are simply uninformed about what language support specialists can do. She has emphasized that, more than anything, AECD decision makers need to know more about the field, how to use specialist services effectively, and how to collaborate to make sure that specialist services offered to Aboriginal families and communities are culturally appropriate and culturally effective.

In this article, we look at what might be truly helpful in supporting Aboriginal children's language development, based on recommendations from a study done with speech-language professionals across Canada who identified themselves as having experience providing services for First Nations and/or Inuit children. In fact, the acronym SLP stands for "speech-language pathologist." However, that title in itself reflects an individual dysfunction focus that many respondents in our study identified as problematic and rejected. How to transform the role of speech-language pathologist into the role of speech-language partner may well be the crux of the issue of how to harness and make accessible the knowledge and skills of these professionals for supporting Aboriginal young children's language development. With this in mind, we will think of SLPs as speech-language partners within this article.

Much of what emerged from our survey were some talking points about how SLPs need to adapt and transform their professional behaviours to work appropriately in partnership with Aboriginal communities. This guidance is crucial to SLPs who are working with early language development in an Aboriginal context, and can be helpful to Aboriginal

administrators, service contractors and caregivers who might wish to consider how the knowledge and experience of SLPs can be appropriately shared to benefit Aboriginal ECD.

Why is This Important?

First, language development is central to how children learn to participate and grow within their cultures. If young children's potential language development within a family or community setting is not being fulfilled, Aboriginal parents, caregivers and community decision makers should have access to specialized knowledge and services so they can better support that development.

Second, Aboriginal patterns and values relating to language development (both Aboriginal mother tongue language and Aboriginal dialect variations of English or French) are at the heart of how Aboriginal peoples embody cultural values. All those who support Aboriginal children in their language development need to understand how to build on the strengths of their cultural values and to clarify what goals, supports and language development activities are most appropriate.

Third, Aboriginal leaders in Canada have argued that the lack of services, as well as culturally inappropriate education, specialist services and screening procedures, result in serious negative consequences for Aboriginal children.¹ This has included over- and under-recognition of children with developmental challenges, undermining of culturally-driven goals for development, and failure to support developmental steps in Aboriginal language learning.²

Across Canada, efforts have been made to define and develop high quality early childhood care and development programs that are culturally based and culturally reinforcing for young Aboriginal children and their families. It is within this context that work also needs to be done to bridge the gaps between specialist training, specialist services and the language support needs of young Aboriginal children.

Background to the Study

This article reports findings of a survey meant to expand knowledge and skills for supporting Aboriginal young children's language development. Aboriginal people in Canada include approximately 1,319,890 First Nations, Inuit and Metis descendents of original inhabitants of the land now called Canada. The survey asked speech-language pathologists

across Canada, with experience providing services to Aboriginal children, for their thoughts on practice with Aboriginal children.

They were asked to participate in this study because of their knowledge and skills in supporting children's development of language in the following areas:

- understanding language;
- expressing themselves using language;
- social communication, including patterns of verbal give and take that are appropriate within their milieu;
- preliteracy and early literacy skills (within children following a culture's typical development pattern); and
- language and preliteracy skills within children for whom language development is not proceeding typically.

Two versions of a survey questionnaire (long – 59 items; short – a subset of the long version with 45 items) were developed to gather quantitative and qualitative information on respondents' attitudes, experiences and recommendations for working in Aboriginal early language development. The questions were developed with input from several speech-language pathologists who have worked extensively with Aboriginal children, one First Nations speech-language pathologist, and one speech-language pathologist researcher who is currently studying cross-cultural practice.

Data Collection

A notice inviting survey responses was published in *Communiqué*, a newsletter for members of the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists (CASLPA). CASLPA is the national certifying body for speech-language pathologists in Canada. Further contact to invite responses was made to provincial representatives throughout Canada, and individual speech-language pathologists, researchers, government personnel and Aboriginal organizations. Surveys were distributed and returned by mail and online.

Seventy completed surveys (27 long, 43 short) were obtained from speech-language pathologists across Canada who reported having experience working with Aboriginal children. Two respondents were First Nations. An additional three respondents identified themselves as members of visible minority groups. All provinces and territories were represented in the sample with the exception of Prince Edward Island. Most (78 per cent) of the respondents had worked with Aboriginal children in the four western provinces. Two-thirds had gained their experience in an Aboriginal school, agency or health centre. More than one-third (38 per cent) reported spending "All" or "A lot" of their time working with Aboriginal children; an additional 29 per cent reported spending "Some" of their time in

the past two years working with Aboriginal children. All respondents had some experience with Aboriginal children under 9 years of age, and most (87 per cent) had worked “primarily” with Aboriginal children 0 to 5 years of age.

Findings

The speech-language pathologists surveyed contributed a richly-detailed, highly-consistent characterization of Aboriginal children’s language behaviours and of Aboriginal parents’ language socialization practices. This characterization can provide some talking points in the dialogue among AECD advocates to develop clearer ways to recognize and respond to the language development needs of specific Aboriginal children in specific (and diverse) Aboriginal cultural contexts.

Respondents also generated a large number of practical recommendations for working alongside parents and communities. Key themes have been constructed that represent results of both the quantitative and qualitative data analyses.

Two other projects were conducted in this effort to better understand Aboriginal children’s language development and the results of these will be reported elsewhere. One project is an interview study documenting First Nations Elders’ and parents’ understandings and goals for children’s language development. Another project is exploring Aboriginal English dialect and implications for Aboriginal children’s language development, assessment of language proficiency and school readiness, and intervention.

All three of these projects are being conducted through the Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships (www.ecdip.org) at the University of Victoria’s School of Child and Youth Care. Together, the three projects are expected to generate recommendations for a more collaborative approach to professional practice with First Nations families and communities. The goals of this work are to ensure cultural continuity for Aboriginal children; to prevent the mislabelling of cultural difference as individual or group “pathology”; and to strengthen family and community capacity for supporting child development.

The Importance of Early Language Development

In child development research, the importance of early language development for cognitive and social learning and school readiness has been well documented.³⁻⁸ Early language development includes everything children do to learn language. It includes prespeaking and precomprehension skills, such as babbling, practising and repeating sounds, learning to

make and perceive the sounds that are relevant for speaking their mother tongue, listening, observing, connecting sounds with objects and actions, hearing specific sounds and combinations of sounds, and focusing attention on selected sounds. It includes learning to distinguish and reproduce the rhythms, cadences and patterns of the mother tongue. It includes the early learning of words and patterns of words, and creating internal rules that guide a child's efforts to generate language. Early language development also includes opportunities to practise evolving language skills in ways that are appropriate to the language practices of the child's culture.⁹ It requires a child's successful use of evolving language skills to get her or his needs met and to participate in her or his cultural milieu.

Most language development researchers today also view reading and writing, including spelling, as applications of language skills that rely on an oral language basis.¹⁰⁻¹⁶ Therefore, the oral language development of children in the years before school sets the foundation for how well they will be able to participate in learning written language.

For Aboriginal children, as for all children whose mother tongue is either a non-standard variant of English or French, or another language altogether, some kind of bridging or transition support is usually necessary to *prepare schools to receive them appropriately and to prepare them to succeed in schools* over time.¹⁷ This is particularly important for children whose mother culture may have values about talk or language usage that do not match the generalized mainstream language values embedded within most public schooling curricula.¹⁸ For example, children whose cultures value listening and observing as a major mode of language learning are likely to be marginalized in a school setting that places highest value on oral participation.

Cultural Differences in Language Socialization and the Value of Talk

Respondents in our study perceived several distinctive features in the apparent value of talk and social use of language by the Aboriginal children and families with whom they have worked. They noted, for example, that talk often appears to be reserved for important matters in social interactions involving Aboriginal children and adults. A lot of talking or "talkativeness" on the part of both children and adults seemed to be discouraged. Listening and observing seemed to be highly valued. A quiet and reflective nature in children seemed to our respondents to be preferred by Aboriginal caregivers.

Respondents often noted that Aboriginal children seem to learn through listening, observing, doing and being included in family and community activities, more than by talking about their experiences and asking questions. Many noted that Aboriginal children with whom they

had worked responded well to interactions involving doing things together with the SLP and with peers, and that they responded better to slower talk, with more pausing, more sharing of information back and forth, and storytelling.

In contrast, European-heritage parents are generally considered to be effective parents if they use a lot of conversation and encourage their child to be talkative. They tend to encourage child-initiated conversation with adults to serve a variety of functions. Typical child assessment situations and classroom situations involve modes of questioning and response that appear to be much more common and familiar to European-heritage children than to many Aboriginal children.

Respondents noted differences in the conversational style and use of language between Aboriginal and European-heritage children and families. There are known cultural differences in aspects of language, such as who initiates conversation and how, under what conditions, what kind of questions are appropriate to ask (direct, indirect, none at all), and what type and amount of eye contact is acceptable. The specific cultural practices of Aboriginal children need to inform the nature and delivery of services to support all forms of learning by Aboriginal children. Some SLPs noted that the content, goals and fast-paced atmosphere in mainstream preschool and school settings seem mismatched with Aboriginal children's experiences, understanding and expression.

Both of the First Nations respondents to our survey pointed out that residential school experiences have resulted in some parents facing unique challenges. Young parents who were not raised by their own parents and who experienced poor modelling and sometimes abuse from residential school caregivers may require specialized support. For some, these experiences resulted in limited parenting skills, such as not knowing how to play with their children, not seeing value in providing books or other preliteracy materials in the home, overly permissive or authoritarian parenting styles, and feelings of inadequacy that left them fearful of or intimidated by schools, teachers and professionals.

What Is a Speech-language Partner?

SLPs assess and provide supports for learning in all aspects of language. This includes comprehension and expression of language content (meanings and application of meaning), form (structural organization of a language and fluency) and use of language (using language to serve various communicative intents).

SLPs have historically taken a therapeutic approach, working one on one with individual children who do not follow the normative patterns of language development, either due to

physical conditions such as impaired hearing or nutritional deficits, or socialization experiences such as inconsistent reinforcement for speaking and lack of opportunities for practising their evolving language skills. In our study, SLP respondents in general advocated broader-based, family-focused and community-level approaches to supporting language development of Aboriginal children. Cross-cultural early language development work has motivated some SLPs to take a more proactive stance, rejecting an individual pathology or deficit model, and applying their knowledge about language stimulation and support to larger contexts based in families, institutions or community programs. They have chosen to take on the role of speech-language *partners*, reinforcing culturally based strengths and building language support capacity within the milieu of families, parenting programs and early childhood programs.

However, when questioned about the circumstances surrounding their engagement with Aboriginal children and families, most respondents reported that they were usually engaged in providing services as a result of referrals for individual children. This may reflect a limited understanding on behalf of communities and agencies about the potential benefits of SLP consultation, mentoring and ongoing developmental monitoring at a population-based level. It does not mean, however, that SLP practice must be limited to individual therapy methods. Supports earmarked for a specific child can be delivered in a way that strengthens the context and overall language support skills of the caregivers and significant people in that child's (and other children's) life.

Respondents were frank about the limitations of their professional training and in-service experiences. Less than half of SLPs reported feeling well prepared, even after two or more years of experience, to serve Aboriginal children and families effectively. They pointed out that to be more effective in supporting AECD, more knowledge about the cultures, community structures, circumstances and community development goals of Aboriginal peoples needs to be developed and made available during professional training and within continuing education. This is another talking point that will be crucial in bridging the needs of Aboriginal communities with the skills of providers of specialized training and services.

The SLPs who responded to our survey appeared to be, for the most part, culturally-sensitized individuals who (in theory at least) advocate a partnership approach to their work with AECD. This is probably due to self-selection, in that the respondents were those who chose to take the time to participate in the study, and who by their own account have worked with Aboriginal individuals or agencies. Thus, they have had the advantage of the consciousness-raising effects of encountering real-life cross-cultural language challenges experienced by young Aboriginal children and their families.

Are SLP Services Available to Aboriginal Communities?

“The programs for preschoolers assume a value of ‘normative development’ along majority culture lines and teach toward advancing children according to those values. Aboriginal children’s experiences, understanding and expression often seemed, in my experience, mismatched with the preschool content and goals. If the school curriculum remains standard, the children who enter school may face the challenge of having developed culturally-appropriate skills but not the prerequisite skills for the provincial school entry expectations.” (AH)

There are many different Aboriginal populations in Canada (605 registered First Nations, many Inuit communities, and a growing number of Metis people). The respondents pointed out repeatedly that Aboriginal children vary in their language development, experiences, foundational beliefs, values and traditions. They also vary in their level of exposure to and involvement with non-Aboriginal social settings and institutions. Therefore, generalizations must be approached cautiously.

However, understanding trends among Aboriginal peoples with regards to the role of language and the value of talk sheds light on cultural bias in mainstream SLP practice, early childhood education and in schooling. From this, we can better appreciate the risks that some Aboriginal parents perceive in accessing mainstream education, speech-language programs and other services.

Having pointed out the risks, we must also point out that SLP services represent a considerable resource for Aboriginal communities, if properly harnessed. Publicly-funded SLP services for all children, from birth to school entry, are delivered through various facilities throughout Canada. These include public health, hospitals, non-profit community-based child and family centres and, in a few instances, school districts. Provincial/territorial governments fund the regional and community-based organizations responsible for these facilities to provide a variety of early intervention programs, some of which include preschool SLP services. SLP services are provided under legislation and policy directives of various provincial/territorial ministries across the country.

Aboriginal families and communities, both on- and off-reserve, are eligible to access SLP services through the facilities that are in place to serve all preschool children in a province or territory, regardless of heritage. Few of these facilities provide SLP services on-reserve

or in remote communities, although some have made this a priority. Most SLP services are provided in cities and towns. Processes for accessing SLP services vary across provinces, territories and facilities.

The federal government funds some specific early intervention programs (e.g. Aboriginal Head Start on- and off-reserve) and special needs services (on-reserve only) for Aboriginal children but does not include SLP services within that funding. Some Aboriginal communities access SLP services by directly contracting with or employing an SLP using discretionary funds available within the community. When this process is used, the community, as the purchaser of service, has greater control over the parameters within which the service will be delivered. Provincial/territorial governments also allocate funding to communities for ECD initiatives under co-funding arrangements within the federal government's National Children's Agenda. The initiatives are community driven according to the priorities identified by each community. Aboriginal communities, as all communities, have many competing priorities for any discretionary funds.

For an Aboriginal community to consider use of discretionary funds for SLP services, it would first need to be informed of the potential benefits of SLP services for supporting ECD. It would then need to view this service as a priority within the continuum of ECD, prevention and early intervention programs which the community would like to have available.

On-reserve Aboriginal communities interested in improving local access to publicly-funded SLP services for preschool children could contact their public health, community-based child and family-serving agencies and school district to describe what they see as their needs for SLP services and request these. Respondents to our survey commented that it would be very helpful for someone in the Aboriginal community to partner with the SLP responsible for providing services in their geographical area. The Aboriginal partner could help guide the SLP to ensure practices that are consistent with the values and wishes of the community, as well as advise the SLP on dialect differences.

Aboriginal communities interested in hiring or contracting directly with an SLP for services could contact Aboriginal organizations for information they might have on SLPs who are interested in providing such services. They could also contact the relevant provincial/territorial association of speech-language pathologists and audiologists for the names of speech-language pathologists to approach, including those in private practice. If on-reserve communities are still unable to access appropriate SLP services, it may be necessary to lobby federal and provincial/territorial governments for improved access to SLP services through new or existing programs or funding.

Talking Points:

Some Conditions Under Which Speech-Language Partners Can Be Helpful to Aboriginal Early Childhood Development

*“Practitioners, and agencies that structure practitioner’s services, need to have time to work **with** First Nations services (e.g. child development workers hired by the band and who are members of the band). Practitioners need time to be a visitor or helper at First Nations preschools and daycares, to better understand and appreciate their way of being...time to build relationships with band councils and elders.” (JH)*

“Practitioners can make an important contribution at the community level, building awareness and understanding of language development, how it progresses and why it matters. Practitioners need to engage in preventive programs that are not necessarily tied to specific children on the caseload. Caseload sizes need to be kept small so that practitioners can be more present and available to the community.” (DM)

The following talking points about how SLPs and other specialized child development practitioners can be helpful to AECD are all predicated on the value of working in partnership. Realistically, as well as idealistically, successful use of specialized services depends on authentic collaboration between service providers, specialists and the families and communities they serve.

Working Within the Cultural Context

Specialists need to learn cultural values specific to the Aboriginal families they serve.

SLPs report having much to learn about the value that language holds and the roles that language plays in the cultures of Aboriginal families and communities. From their perspective, the training they received on cultural values has been inadequate, and they have had to learn cultural sensitivity on the job. They noted that for an SLP trained to work with European-heritage families, Aboriginal families do not appear so eager to engage actively in stimulating vocabulary development or frequent conversation with their children. However, rather than seeing this as a deficit, the SLP and the particular community jointly need to identify the values and styles of language interaction that culture holds as ideal and language facilitation strengths in the community upon which to build. For example, respondents mentioned working with communities with a preference for quiet, observant children who are quietly respectful of Elders, and who can learn from watching and listening. Methods that build on these strengths include helping to organize frequent storytelling activities,

and creating cross-age active learning situations where younger children can hear and use language in the context of action. With guidance from community members, SLPs and their community partners can design methods of language stimulation and support that are culturally appropriate and culturally appreciative. Leaders in research on SLP practice have also identified cultural bias as a potential problem in the application of many models of early language facilitation, early intervention and parent education, and have offered suggestions for culturally-responsive practices.^{19,20}

Working Collaboratively

Specialists need to understand that the knowledge they bring is just part of a successful language support effort.

“An altogether different approach is needed. This would include taking the time to learn about the specific community, their values and hopes for their children, making the link between this information and the already known professional information, and figuring out how to effectively bridge the two to support the caregivers in the community to best facilitate language development that respects a desire to maintain first language, as well as to develop facility in the language of school or mainstream culture.” (CF)

“Non-helpful practices include telling the adults what to do...telling the adults you’ll show them what to do, giving written handouts or inviting the community to a lecture or presentation. It is not helpful to assume that you know what to do and by virtue of your knowledge you have the right to tell Aboriginal people how to communicate with, teach or raise their children.” (AH)

“Check your assumptions at the door. Pragmatics in particular are a big issue. You need to learn about appropriate interaction patterns.” (MZ)

Among the respondents, 79 per cent perceived an urgent need for an altogether different approach to serving Aboriginal children, compared to serving children of dominant cultural groups (e.g. European heritage). There was general consensus among the respondents that an “expert” service orientation is ineffective. Family- and community-driven practice that is consultative and collaborative is more culturally appropriate than professionally driven approaches. SLPs strongly emphasized the importance of working with Elders, community governing bodies, parents and other trusted service providers, and being responsive to expressed values and wishes. In their experience, these people can offer feedback about tools, methods and messages that are likely to be accepted and effective in various families or community groups.

Events to support parents' learning need to be structured in ways that fit the parents' most comfortable working style, rather than to suit the professional's convenience. For example, meetings are best conducted within small rather than large groups, including a social aspect to help make the event less threatening for parents.

A Relationship Approach

SLPs need to build trusting relationships with families and key individuals in the community.

SLP respondents consistently pointed to the importance of establishing positive and trusting relationships with Aboriginal caregivers of Aboriginal children, and with people who are trusted within the Aboriginal community to which the child belongs. This requires a consistent presence in the community, patience, time, flexibility, understanding and a desire to learn. Learning through listening and observing without asking a lot of questions are important interactive skills to use.

“It seems best to start by learning what is already being done, how and why and with what result. Make partnerships with the community. Get to know individual people by listening to them.” (AH)

“What worked for me was behaving as the ‘invited guest’ – being quietly present, playing with children, chatting with Elders, parents, educators, etc. and asking what I could do – what kind of service they would like and then making a plan together. I rarely pulled a child for “one on one.” I received many verbal compliments for that. Practices that are not helpful include trying to work quickly, telling them what you would like to do before they’ve stated their needs and requests, not taking time to build trust, removing children from a group.” (BD)

There was a general consensus that time must be provided to build authentic relationships that demonstrate caring and respect for the values and wishes expressed, as a foundation for education, support or intervention.

Assessment That is Acceptable to the Community

Methods of evaluating children’s language need to fit the culture.

The term “tools” refers to numerous published tests and measures of speech, language and communication development, as well as education/intervention materials for supporting language development. SLPs draw from the many published tools available in selecting

appropriate methods and materials for screening, assessing and supporting development of children's language. In addition to published materials, SLPs generally also make use of numerous unpublished methods and materials for the same purposes. In selecting appropriate tools, the SLP considers many factors, including the age of the child, the aspect(s) of language to focus on, the priorities of parents and others, the environmental experiences and functional needs of the child, and so on.

SLPs in this study questioned the usefulness of currently available published tools for use with Aboriginal children. Over half of the respondents perceived that it is critical to develop new education/intervention and assessment tools specifically for Aboriginal children. Forty-one per cent also perceived a need to develop new tools for monitoring overall development suitable for Aboriginal children (e.g. experientially relevant materials and tasks).

Many Aboriginal parents and ECD practitioners have expressed frustration about culturally-inappropriate assessments that labelled their children deviant or deficient, when it was more likely that the assessment approach, tool or norms were culturally biased and inappropriate. The very concept of "testing" and ranking the developmental levels of children, as practised in many methods of child development assessment, is offensive to many Aboriginal parents. Assessment may be viewed as discordant with cultural values involving appreciating each child for who they are, accepting differences, and waiting until children are older before attributing characteristic qualities to them about their value system.

Assessments that have been developed and validated with a European-heritage population are generally not appropriate for Aboriginal children, often in significant structural ways. Therefore, Aboriginal communities need to help the SLP sort through her or his toolkit to find ways of investigating what is going on with children's language development, whether it is healthy and robust in terms of the culture, and how to support more effective language-strengthening activities.

"For assessment, it would be helpful for the practitioner and community members to sit together and discuss: What skills does the child need to communicate effectively at home, school and in the community? How close is the child coming to accomplishing those? What bridges can be built to support the child in meeting the demands of educational language in the school? How should the curriculum be changed at preschool and school to respond to the information obtained?" (LD)

First Nations respondents to our survey recommended that more relevant education/intervention strategies and tools for teaching would include visuals such as pictures of

First Nations people and familiar rural community themes. They would also include story and legend retelling activities. Crafts using local clay and leather, followed by group discussion for retelling the steps involved, would be helpful. Also recommended were community outings with photos to use for retelling later. One First Nation respondent emphasized that new screening measures would take into account language development differences (e.g. pronouns, prepositions) and speech dialect differences.

Community Capacity-building Approach

SLPs should focus on building on strengths to help communities to help themselves.

More than half of SLPs reported spending most of their time in Aboriginal contexts providing services to individual children with communicative disorders and weak language skills. SLPs endorsed all approaches to service delivery in Aboriginal communities as helpful. However, most respondents strongly recommended that services to Aboriginal children use a more population-based, capacity-building approach than is currently practised.

A valued goal of many Aboriginal communities is to strengthen knowledge and skills within families and among members who are leading health and human service initiatives for their community. Whenever possible, SLPs need to engage with community members to strengthen their understanding about SLP services, their capacity to identify developmental concerns, to advocate and to partner in service delivery.

The two First Nations respondents to our survey made some specific suggestions related to the key theme of capacity building as follows:

- The whole family, including the extended family, should be involved in service planning when possible.
- Older siblings may make excellent mediators of communication programming, as they are often responsible for the younger children.
- Frequent consultation sessions and short assessment sessions work best.
- SLPs can be employed to act as indirect mediators whose role is the education of other agency workers and support for parents' language facilitation efforts.
- Standardized testing or use of lengthy questionnaires early on is not helpful.
- If attendance is an issue, it is important to problem solve and possibly change the service delivery model – connect with other services, community workers and/or family members. Terminating services is not useful.
- Referrals to other agencies outside the community should be postponed until rapport is established. Attendance at referrals is more likely if the referring individual mediates.

A Population-based Approach

Speech and language issues need to be addressed in context and not as isolated needs.

In cultures that have been disrupted and individuals have been displaced, as has happened to most Aboriginal peoples, individuals often experience problems that are in part contextual or communal, rather than strictly personal. For such individuals, contextual and communal responses can help tremendously. Current research validates the importance of cultural context as a foundation for meaningful programs of support for children's development, using family- and community-centred practice models.

Many early intervention strategies still heavily used by SLPs in Canada are based on individual deficit models that have been developed largely in middle-class urban settings based on the values, beliefs and goals of families primarily of European descent. Alternatives need to be explored for adjusting language support and intervention strategies to match the historical realities, and present cultural and community conditions of Aboriginal children in need of language development support. These strategies need to take into account not only the goals for individual children's development, but also the family's or community's receptivity to various approaches.²¹⁻²⁶

Mother Tongue and Dialect Issues

SLPs can support language development in an Aboriginal mother tongue, even when they don't speak that language themselves.

Seventy per cent of respondents noted that, although mother tongue is typically not incorporated into their services, SLPs can play an important role in supporting children to learn and use their mother tongue. They reported being eager to support children learning their mother tongue if they were given help from speakers of a child's mother tongue. Many respondents expressed their belief that parents should be encouraged to maintain their dominant language used at home. This is consistent with professional practice guidelines and directions for SLPs working in a multilingual and multicultural context.²⁷⁻²⁹ Some respondents cited the positive contributions that learning the mother tongue can make to a child's sense of connection to community and to self-esteem.

One of the First Nations respondents to our survey pointed out that some parents might not feel comfortable disclosing the fact that they use their mother tongue with their children. For families interested in supporting their mother tongue as the child's first language, she advised that parents turn off the TV, use picture story books and photos to "read" to their children rather than reading stories in English, and use general language stimulation techniques. For parents who use two languages in the home, she advises them to use a

particular language consistently in a particular setting. She informs them of the importance of saying an entire message in one language only, without mixing the two, so that the child is able to learn how each language works.

Policy Implications and Recommendations, Based on the SLP Survey

1. The values and priorities of Aboriginal families and communities should inform the goals and mode of delivery of SLP services.

Family support (for individual-based services) or community support (for population-based services) needs to be obtained before using tools and approaches for testing and intervention with children. This is particularly important in the area of assessment, given that there are many important inter- and intracultural differences between the beliefs, values and experiences of Aboriginal peoples and the populations upon which existing tools for measuring language and communication skills have been developed.

2. Prepare SLPs to engage in cross-cultural partnerships rather than in isolation as experts.

More knowledge, skills and cultural self-awareness need to be developed during SLP training and continuing education. Aboriginal ECD practitioners may need to work alongside SLPs to help them develop cultural sensitivity, knowledge of cultural protocols, and responsiveness to community goals for Aboriginal children's language development.

3. Increase professional training of Aboriginal SLPs.

There are very few Aboriginal SLPs in Canada. Strategies to remove barriers to access training and building incentives to increase Aboriginal capacity need to be explored with representatives of government, Aboriginal groups and the training universities.

4. Dialogue and partner with Aboriginal community leaders.

Through existing Aboriginal ECD advisory structures/personnel in the various provinces and territories, efforts must be made to ensure that Aboriginal community leaders are informed of available SLP services. Community-based practitioners and service contractors should work alongside the SLP providing services in their

region to ensure a service approach that supports local traditions, values and priorities.

5. Increase resources for speech-language services to Aboriginal young children.

Targeted funding for speech-language services to Aboriginal children needs to be made available for both on- and off-reserve populations.

6. Create Aboriginal provincial/territorial advisors for speech-language development programs serving Aboriginal young children.

Descriptions by SLP research participants convey a clear impression that Aboriginal children's experiences with language and the role of language are unique in many ways compared to non-Aboriginal children, and require an altogether different approach. Most SLPs report being unprepared to serve Aboriginal children and families effectively even after two or more years of experience. Given the importance of early language development for cognitive and social learning and school readiness, Aboriginal provincial/territorial advisors for Aboriginal preschool speech-language programs need to be established parallel to and working in conjunction with existing provincial/territorial Aboriginal ECD advisory personnel.

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TALKING POINTS

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Measuring Social Support in Aboriginal Early Childhood Programs

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Overview

Social support for families is a goal of many Aboriginal child care and development programs, such as Aboriginal Head Start (AHS). From our experience with various Aboriginal Early Childhood Development (ECD) community-based training and service programs, and from discussions with managers in AHS, we knew there was an interest in and a need for examining the impact of child care programs on social support within Aboriginal communities. We have long seen child care as a family-centred practice, and so we were keen to explore how to measure the impacts of child care programs on the reception and perception of social support by families whose children attend Aboriginal child care programs. Two First Nations community-based programs on Vancouver Island offered to be partners in this exploratory study.

Child care is part of a web woven by a community to support its children and its parents. Research has long shown that early childhood programs have the potential to support parents.¹ When parents feel supported in their role, they tend to be more positive and responsive in their caregiving.² How parents perceive and receive the support that is potentially available to them through the program that their child attends is a question that managers and staff of child care programs often ask themselves. Many Aboriginal early childhood practitioners and program administrators have asked whether there is a simple

survey tool that could be used to monitor and evaluate social support impacts of their service. After a review of the literature and many discussions with First Nations partners about the best way to examine the impacts of early childhood programs, we developed two questionnaires and pilot-tested them in the two partnering First Nations community-based programs. The results of the questionnaires, the experience of the researchers, the subsequent discussions with staff of the two early childhood centres, and recommendations regarding practice and further investigations are reported in this article.

Nutsumaat Lelum and Smun'eem

Nutsumaat Lelum Child Care Centre, part of the Chemainus First Nation, is located outside Ladysmith on Vancouver Island, just off the Island Highway. Set in a beautiful clearing with tall trees in the back, the centre's building is low, made of wood, and fits comfortably among the trees. The whole building is used for programs for children, from babies to kindergarten age. Also within this clearing are a recreation centre and a health centre for Elders in the community. About 40 families and 56 children are served in these children's programs, which include an AHS program, care for children under age 3 and a kindergarten program. A bus picks up and returns many of the children attending the AHS program. Joan Gignac, the director at *Nutsumaat Lelum*, discussed the current project with us and introduced us to her staff.

Joan subsequently introduced us to Ramona Melanson who runs *Smun'eem* Child Care Centre for the Peneluket Tribe at Kuper Island. Ramona welcomed us to her program, which serves approximately 29 children from 21 families. There is a daycare centre serving children 0 to 5 years of age and an AHS program for the children who are 4 and will be attending a school-based kindergarten the following year.

A brief walk from a 10-minute ferry ride from Vancouver Island, the *Smun'eem* daycare and preschool program are in separate buildings connected by a covered play area. The daycare is a light-filled room where windows look out on trees and the playground. Since *Smun'eem* is a smaller program than *Nutsumaat Lelum*, the children can be in family groupings. Staff found that the babies demonstrated a strong desire (climbing over and under objects in the daycare) to be with their big brothers and sisters, and so the daycare has a variance in its license from the Ministry of Health Child Care Facilities Branch so the babies do not need to be in a separate group. The babies toddle around after the bigger kids, and the older children are very gentle and watch out for the little ones.

Within both the Peneluket Tribe and Chemainus First Nation, the child care programs have been creatively connected with other parts of the community. The directors of these AHS programs are actively involved in the communities in a holistic manner. For example, Joan

has provided craft evenings for the community, while Ramona is helping to get a soccer field for older children in the community.

Both of these programs work in informal ways to support parents. For example, while visiting *Nutsumaat Lelum*, a staff person was observed being approached by a father of a one-year-old to take care of his child over a weekend. The father seemed to feel that the caregiver knew his son well and the child was very comfortable with this woman. The caregiver was excited about this possibility, and talked to Joan about it.

In more urban areas, staff may worry about liability issues and be reluctant to be seen as “babysitters.” When asked about the program’s policy on staff looking after children on off-hours, Joan explained that some staff members are relatives of children in the program, and so they would normally look after those they see at daycare when it is closed. Joan accepted these out-of-program care arrangements between staff and parents as long as they were separate from the program. Echoing Joan’s words: “We are all family.³ This permeable boundary between program and family care is a practical way in which staff extend support to families.”

Social Support

Social support has been defined as “the mechanism by which interpersonal relationships presumably protect people from the deleterious effects of stress.⁴ This type of support influences people’s health and well-being in a complex manner. Untwining social interactions and relationships to get at the defining elements is challenging.⁵

The first mention of the connection between health and social ties was in the late 1890s by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. He pointed out the higher suicide rate among factory workers who had left their farms and villages to move to the city. Seventy years later, Cassel and Cobb picked up on Durkheim’s observations and made the connection that people with good social support are, generally, in better health.⁶

Researchers have found that people embedded in supportive social networks are more likely to be buffered from the effects of stress.^{7,8} Friends and family can offer tangible support, such as money, food, shelter, information, advice and caregiving. Interestingly, while practical assistance in a crisis can be experienced as helpful and supportive, research suggests that what is even more helpful is the *perception* by individuals that support and caring are *available* in their immediate environment. Understanding how people define and perceive social support is challenging. It is not clear to investigators or program evaluators how to measure how successfully someone is connected to a community, how that person views those connections, how those relationships are structured, or how they actually work to provide actual or potential support.

Measurement of Social Support

Clearly, social support cannot be treated as a unitary concept as it has several entwined dimensions. One type of support may be more effective in one context, while another type is effective in a different situation. Several instruments have been developed to measure different dimensions of support where context, situation and type of support must all be considered.⁹ Sorting through the different dimensions of social support, as well as the meanings assigned to this concept by various ethnic groups and individuals, takes sensitive research.

Social networks

Social networks can be defined in terms of size, density or structure. People may have a small network of friends and relations who know each other well (highly dense network) or a wide network of friends who are not connected (less dense network). Different networks vary in their usefulness at different points in an individual's life.¹⁰ Cohen, Gottlieb and Underwood¹¹ have reviewed research that shows a clear association between social networks and health, but their explanation for this association is not straightforward. Defining an individual's network of social support presents difficulties since those networks vary widely. By defining network membership more narrowly (e.g. only married people, only people with brothers, or those who belong to a church), researchers have had some success.¹² However, this limited look may leave out relevant factors. For example, MacPhee and colleagues¹³ warned that there are ethnic differences in networks of families, as well as influences of contexts, such as income level and rural or urban settings. Not only do social networks differ, but how the network functions to support families also differs across ethnic groups, social ecologies and geographies.

Social integration

People participate in a variety of social relationships and research has clearly demonstrated the health benefits, for most people, of having a broad range of social relationships. These relationships might include a spiritual community, recreation partners, neighbours or family.¹⁴ A broader and more diffuse network, where a person has relationships in a variety of separate areas which do not overlap, may allow an individual space to develop personally while a denser network, such as a close network of friends and family who all know each other, may support someone to remain in a particular role.¹⁵ Either way, being an active member of a community seems to promote a sense of belonging and of being cared for and supported.

Perceived social support

Social support has several functions: emotional support, tangible support, informational support, companionship support, and validation.¹⁶ Some of these functions fall clearly into the category of received help – information and/or resources are tangible expressions of

help – while other help, such as emotional support or companionship, may be received, but may or may not be perceived as support. Some received help is, of course, useful, but the overall buffering effects seem to come from perceived support rather than from actual help or received support.

Cohen and colleagues¹⁷ explained that: “It is the perception that others will provide resources when they are needed that is the key to stress-buffering... in short, the data suggest that whether or not one actually receives support is less important for health and adjustment than one’s beliefs about its availability” (p. 7). Of course, in certain situations received support may be the support necessary to the situation and may be perceived as such. Received support and perceived support measures are not identical, as each may produce different effects. Understanding the different dynamics of received support and perceived support is a central challenge when assessing an intervention.¹⁸

Relationship

Relationship is another area for examination. Cohen and colleagues¹⁹ and Sarason, Sarason and Pierce²⁰ suggested that looking at the properties and processes of relationship may yield pertinent information. In this area of research, there are some unanswered questions.²¹ How do perceived support and actual relationship processes interact? What are the types of relationships that are the most supportive and what are the qualities of attachments that facilitate health? What effect does social support have on parents?

Parents and Social Support

Parents are very influential in the lives of their children. When they feel supported in their parental role, they prove to be more responsive and positive as caregivers.^{22, 23} Recognizing this, most early childhood programs try to support parents. In the United States, for example, the Head Start program has actively included parents since its inception,²⁴ as has AHS in Canada.²⁵

Doherty²⁶ has taken a close look at types of programs designed to enhance or promote child development in Canada and other countries. She has pointed out that while there is a higher incidence of developmental vulnerability for children living in poverty and/or living with a lone parent, *most* children are *not* at risk. Poverty can be stressful and depressing to a parent, thus making parents more vulnerable to poor parenting choices. But ineffective or detrimental parenting can exist anywhere and anytime. According to Doherty’s²⁷ review of research, key factors that put a child’s development at risk include:

- parenting styles (particularly hostile parenting);
- living with a stressed parent;

- living with a parent who is depressed; and
- lack of adequate stimulation (language and cognition).

Doherty²⁸ looked at three different types of programs aimed at supporting children's development: child-focused programs, parent-focused programs, and combined children's program and parent-focused programs. She concluded that child-focused programs, and in particular centre-based group programs of high quality, are "the most effective for children at risk for developmental problems when they begin prior to age of 3 and are provided on a full-day rather than a part-day basis" (p. ii). High quality child care provides parents with support as they work or look for a full-time job or pursue further education without having to worry about their children. At the same time, high quality child care programs provide informal relationships with staff and other parents.

There is increasing call to support children's social and emotional well-being nationally and internationally.^{29,30} Myers³¹ emphasized that "unity and interaction among the physical, mental, social, and emotional dimensions of development lie at the core of the discussion" (p. xxiii). He has consistently called for policies that empower families and communities, building on their strengths (p. xix).

Over the last 30 years, there has been the emergence of "the image of early childhood programs as family support systems that function as modern-day versions of the traditional extended family" (p. 60).³² Powell noted that there is an accepted understanding within the field that supporting parents will strengthen parenting behaviours. Another key to the effectiveness of child care programs that Powell identified is the confidence parents and staff had in each other. Parents tend to be concerned about caregivers' knowledge and skills, and must trust that the caregiver is a caring person, while caregivers tend to be focused on encouraging open communication with parents and discussion on child-rearing questions.

American Head Start and Social Support

Supporting parents has been a goal of American Head Start from its inception in 1967; parents are encouraged to be involved in decision making, helping in the class or working with their child. Studies conclude that parental involvement contributes to positive growth and upward mobility of American Head Start parents. Research has shown that parents involved with American Head Start have a greater quality of life, increased confidence in coping skills and decreased feeling of anxiety, depression and stress.³³

Early childhood programs can offer support to families, as families have interactions with the programs every day. At pick-up and drop-off times, parents can connect with staff, if only for a few minutes, and these informal exchanges can build relationships. For example, the Alaska Head Start Family Wellness Demonstration Project, investigating family strengths, found that participating families mentioned Head Start as providing social support.³⁴ In other research, bolstering parents' belief in their ability to advocate for their children appeared to increase parents' perceived effectiveness in their children's lives, which was related to their children's academic abilities.³⁵ As parents gain confidence with their role in the well-being of their children, they are empowered to see themselves as their children's teachers, as advocates for their children, and as having an effect on their development.³⁶ Children's well-being and the well-being of parents, families and communities seem to be interrelated.³⁷

American Head Start has, as one of its goals, the encouragement of parental advocacy skills. Several studies³⁸⁻⁴⁰ have found that parents who were involved with Head Start programs did gain self-confidence and the skills necessary to advocate for their children. Advocacy skills are necessary for parents to access needed resources for their children and themselves. Parents need confidence and skills to be advocates, and also time to pursue their own goals of work, school or reorganization of their lives.

Aboriginal Head Start

Results of studies of American Head Start and other studies and reports⁴¹ formed part of the impetus for initiating AHS in Canada in the mid-1990s. Consistent with Head Start philosophy, parents and community are involved in the "design and implementation of preschool projects."⁴² AHS has an added emphasis on culture, with an explicit goal being the celebration of the diverse Aboriginal communities and their cultures across Canada. The British Columbia Aboriginal Child Care Society⁴³ has produced a handbook on the process of developing culturally-focused Aboriginal early childhood programs, enhancing cultural relevance and the unique cultural aspects of each community.

Aboriginal Head Start in British Columbia and Parental Support

While AHS is relatively new, infant development programs have been operating in some Aboriginal communities in British Columbia for over 20 years.^{44,45} Their goal has also been to work to "enhance the Native cultural values and traditional child-rearing practices in the family" (p. 13).⁴⁶

Greenwood and Fiske⁴⁷ recently studied the impact of AHS programs on social support in communities in British Columbia, gathering data on "how participating parents and guardians

perceived the role of the Head Start Program in their support networks” (p. 9). Involving eight child care programs, they used a modified version of the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ). They found that most families viewed their involvement in AHS as being supportive. Reporting findings similar to studies of American Head Start,⁴⁸⁻⁵¹ they also found that involvement in the program gave parents “a new sense of confidence” and encouragement to advocate for their children.

Comments collected by Greenwood and Fiske⁵² indicated that the roles of AHS staff in supporting parents were even more important when extended family was far away. In particular, staff offered opportunities for cultural learning when family was absent. Head Start as a program was seen to be supportive, but the “caring and reliable” relationship with the staff was “the most important support” (p. 22).

Our Research

Several points emerged from looking at Greenwood and Fiske’s *Social support project: BC Aboriginal Head Start*.⁵³ They had modified the SSQ to be culturally sensitive and included questions relating to issues of culture. They had also interviewed participants and recorded their voluntary comments. The authors noted the sensitive nature of these issues of social support and the possible distressing effect of interviewing people who may have had traumatic incidents in their lives.

The authors aimed for a balanced sample of 10 parents from each of the eight centres studied, who were seen as: a) being inactive in social support networks and activities; b) parents/guardians who were former AHS parents actively participating in social support networks; and c) current active parents/guardians. However, they fell short of their goal of 10 participants from each of the eight centres and their proposed balance of parents/guardians. We speculated that this might have been because of the length and detail of the questionnaire.

Hoping to achieve greater parental participation, we created a simple one-page questionnaire, shown in Table 1. The language was intended to be plain and unambiguous. The questions were intended to be relatively non-intrusive, as probing into social networks can have emotional impacts (e.g. parents new to a community and feeling isolated, or those who may have recently lost a friend). We focused on trying to learn more about the friends on whom parents relied for support with their children. Relevant to their efficacy as parents, this was an area most likely affected by the early childhood program. Coming and going, and meeting other parents and staff, parents have the potential to create new relationships.

TABLE 1

Parent Social Support Questionnaire

Please help us by answering the following questions. We are hoping to understand how child care programs support families.

In these questions, "child care program" means _____ .

1. Does your child seem to enjoy being at his or her child care program.

Always Sometimes Never

2. Does your child sing songs, tell stories, or do activities he/she learned at the program?

Always Sometimes Never

3. Do you, as a parent, feel welcomed in the program?

Always Sometimes Never

4. Does the staff have time to answer any questions you might have?

Always Sometimes Never

5. Through the program, have you met other families with whom you have begun a friendship?

No families 1–2 families 3 or more families

6. If you have a worry about your child, whom can you ask? (Circle all that apply)

Child care staff Family Another parent in the program

Other (explain) _____

7. Since joining the child care program, are there more people you can turn to for help if you have a family worry or emergency?

Yes Maybe No

8. If you had a family emergency and child care staff were available, would you turn to them?

Yes Maybe No

9. Whom do you ask about traditional knowledge and ways of raising children?

Elders Family Child care staff

Other _____

10. Since your child started the program, do you feel there are more people supporting you as a parent?

Yes Maybe No

11. "I feel I am a better parent since my child started coming to the program." Is this true for you?

Yes Maybe No

12. Can you describe how the child care program has affected your family?

Several of our questions were aimed at discerning the quality of the early childhood program when receiving and responding to parents. It is considered good practice to create a welcoming environment. If parents felt welcomed, we believed that they would be more open to a relationship with the staff and other parents. If parents felt staff had time for their questions, it would seem that staff were communicating that they valued parents and their concerns.

We also created a questionnaire for staff, as shown in Table 2. The questionnaire helped us to explore whether there is a connection between how parents view a child care program and how staff view their role with parents. In the pilot study, staff responded very favourably to the questionnaire and the process of filling them out stimulated intensive staff discussion about parents’ social support networks.

TABLE 2

Staff Questionnaire

Please fill out the following questionnaire. We are hoping to understand how child care programs support families. We are asking parents in your program to fill out a questionnaire about where they find support as parents. We would also like to ask for your input.

- As a staff person, do you feel that you have time to welcome parents at drop-off and pick-up times?**
 Always Most of the time Sometimes Never
- Do parents approach you with questions about their children?**
 Often Sometimes Never
- Do you feel that you have time to answer parents’ concerns or questions?**
 Always Most of the time Sometimes Never
- In your program, do you see parents making connections with each other?**
 Often Sometimes Never

Comments: _____

Urban Versus On-Reserve Programs

The programs participating in the project by Greenwood and Fiske were in urban areas. In contrast, our research was carried out with on-reserve programs embedded in rural communities. On-reserve and off-reserve contexts present very different social network

scenarios. On-reserve, social networks tend to be closely knit, potentially with siblings attending the centre together, cousins in the same group and many of the parents related to or familiar with one another. If the AHS staff are from the community, they might be aunts or grandmothers of some of the children in the program. Off-reserve programs tend to have a looser structure because families are from different communities and bands, often from distant locales, which have far less interrelatedness.

In British Columbia, most on-reserve child care and development programs are in rural areas, while off-reserve programs are mainly in urban areas. Parents in each setting face different problems and different stresses. In an urban setting, parents may experience a sense of isolation or racism that might not be as omnipresent for parents within an established Aboriginal community. However, parents in a small, rural Aboriginal community may not be able to escape non-supportive relationships. These examples of possible differences illustrate the point that families living on-reserve may have different sets of social support strengths and challenges than families living off-reserve.

On-reserve programs typically have only one culture and language on which to focus. Off-reserve programs may have several language groups and cultures represented among the parents and children. Thus, the approach to culture and language will differ depending on where a program is embedded. Since social support is a question of social networks, social relationships and how they interact to support parents, different forces may be at work depending upon the location of the child care program.

Findings at Nutsumaat Lelum and Smun'eem

The *Nutsumaat Lelum* Child Care Centre near Ladysmith and *Smun'eem* Child Care Program on Kuper Island agreed to pilot the questionnaire. The staff of both programs were relatively confident about their relations with parents and conveyed that they did not feel threatened by the questionnaire going out to parents. The directors in both programs actively and persistently asked the parents whose children were attending their program to complete the questionnaire survey. The return rate was 33 per cent for *Nutsumaat Lelum* and 29 per cent for *Smun'eem*. Almost all of the respondents were mothers, though not all, and so we have used the term “parents” in this report. The fact that most parents involved in child care programs and in research are mothers is often overlooked. Outreach and involvement of fathers in child care programs and research remains a challenge in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal contexts. It is likely that social support is perceived and accessed differently by men than by women, and that different kinds of program activities and overtures by staff are effective for mothers and not for fathers. This is an area of research and programming that warrants more attention.

Similar to the experience of Greenwood and Fiske, we found that surveyed parents/guardians were “satisfied with the social support they received.” Our questionnaires and observations indicated that parents felt supported and connected to the staff and program. Parents also felt that since they began bringing their child to the child development program they had more people supporting them as a parent. So it would seem that their social networks had increased or grown broader. Participants in the study by Greenwood and Fiske⁵⁴ noted that meeting other individuals through child care activities “gave them an opportunity to develop connections” which resulted in one or more social relationships. In our study, almost all parents felt that they had met at least one or two new families through the child care program with whom they had become friends. Parents reported that they felt they could turn to another parent in the program for advice or support. Over half of the respondent parents agreed that they felt they had more support and were better parents since becoming involved in the program: “I feel support emotionally, mentally and I know that my son is well taken care of and the staff are compassionate for our First Nation children.”

Parents who responded were very positive about the role of *Nutsumaat Lelum* and *Smun’eem* in their lives and the lives of their children. They felt welcomed and saw their children learning and enjoying the program: “*Nutsumaat Lelum* has had a positive impact on our children and our family as a whole. We have a reliable service for all three of our children that we know our children enjoy. We can leave them and feel good about it with no regret. Overall, the staff are great...very understanding, very loving.” Feeling welcomed and seeing their child’s involvement in the program included and supported the parents: “I was brought up abused so I have a hard time trusting people. *Nutsumaat Lelum* is like another family for me.”

Parents perceived caregivers as having the time to answer their questions. Most parents reported that they felt they could ask caregivers if they had a concern about their child. Most parents also felt they could or might turn to child care staff in emergencies. “They are always willing to help/support me as a single mother and I welcome any advice they may have.”

Staff were more critical of themselves than the parents were about staff. While parents felt staff were welcoming and approachable, staff felt they did not always have time to welcome parents or to answer their questions and that there was more they could be doing. Staff may feel they are too busy, but this does not necessarily come across to parents. Having spoken with staff and observed the programs, it seems that the staff in both programs have set high standards for themselves.

In conversation with the staff of both programs, it was clear that staff wanted to connect with families. One staff person echoed others’ comments when she said, “It is difficult to

be there for parents as they come in every morning, but when parents initiate conversation or questions I make every effort to acknowledge, help and find answers to their concerns.”

Another staff person, who felt she did not always have time for parents, elaborated: “My time in daycare and preschool is limited and that reflects upon my answers [to the questionnaire]. But living in the community covers this limitation. Because I live here, I am aware of family and children and I can keep up to date. Coast Salish tradition provides care for each other all the time and does not limit caring to just work time.”

These two groups of staff had confidence; their programs had been running for a few years. They viewed the questionnaire as a tool to evaluate and possibly improve their programs, not as a threat. A new staff member in a new program may not have felt the same way. They might be new early childhood educators or new to the community. One staff member commented: “For non-status early childhood educators, it takes time to establish trust with families – families turn to aunts who work here.”

Issues in Measurement of Social support

There are difficulties doing this research. Greenwood and Fiske⁵⁵ noted “social support measures seek to identify complex relationships” (p. 6). Exactly what to measure, and how, is not always clear. A parent with a wide network of friends and relations has multiple sources for information and resources. What type of friend is the best? How close and supportive is the family or how open is the social network? These are all relevant questions. Network structures function differently from one another and differently depending upon the context. While evidence points to AHS’s role in providing social support and encouraging social support networks, a closer look will yield a deeper understanding.

Choice of Method

A questionnaire is the most common approach for investigating social support. However, filling out a questionnaire takes time, and for people with young children it may be just one more task that can be put off until later. At both sites, it took considerable effort from the staff, the director and the researcher to get the one-third return that we did. In a discussion following the implementation of the questionnaire, the staff at *Nutsumaat Lelum* decided they were not enthusiastic about using a questionnaire as a method; they felt parents did not have the time or the inclination to fill it out, and that it did not yield as much insight as an oral interview might do. They suggested emailing or calling parents. However, in a follow-up discussion with parents to explore their preferences, no parents were eager to be interviewed over the phone and they pointed out that email was possible only for a few parents with access to a computer and the Internet.

Participation Rates

There were other practical problems. In many AHS programs and child care programs, children come to and from home on a bus, making it difficult to ask their parents to fill out a questionnaire or to be interviewed in person. In our study, it was much easier to connect with the families of the infants and toddlers who do come into the program to drop off and pick up their child. An in-person request was more successful. If a research or program evaluation process is planned to stretch over a period of time, then connecting with parents of infants and toddlers and continuing the contact might yield higher participation rates.

Sampling Bias

Another challenge is sampling bias. As Greenwood and Fiske found, in our study the questionnaires were more likely to be filled out by parents who were actively involved in and connected to the program. These parents are already predisposed to be positive. Hearing from parents who are less active in their children's programs—and especially from fathers—would give a richer picture of their impact on social support. For future research, more intensive case study may be fruitful. For example, staff could hold information sessions with parents explaining the importance of the information-gathering exercise, encourage everyone to participate and recognize participation in the study with an honorarium. Clearly, this is not practical for program evaluation on a regular basis.

Social Intrusion

Another difficulty is the intrusive nature of questions about social support. We agree with Greenwood and Fiske that questions must be asked with care to avoid bringing up painful issues, such as drawing attention to isolation or loss of support. An Elder member of Penelakut Tribe pointed out that many Aboriginal parents may lack confidence about their parenting effectiveness. She suggested that instead of asking parents if their parenting had “improved” since their children became involved in the early childhood program, it might be better to ask if they were more “knowledgeable.” She explained: “We wouldn't want them to think they were a bad parent before.”

Challenging Staff Confidence

Both of the child care centres that participated in this pilot study were extremely welcoming and helpful. Both had been going for several years and had ironed out many of the problems that programs typically face as they are getting started. But for parents

and staff in communities just developing their program, a questionnaire could seem overwhelming or threatening and yield low participation and even biased reports shielding realities about the extent of outreach and support to parents.

Paperwork Overload

The two directors were busy with their programs and within the community and, although the program, staff, families and children were their primary focus, each one found the time to help with questionnaire return and to meet with the researcher. However, we recognized that it is important not to distract or overload the director with too many additional tasks. The large amount of paperwork expected in many Aboriginal early childhood programs is a recurrent theme among child care practitioners in our research projects.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality can be an issue in on-reserve programs. Asking parents' perceptions of the support they receive from their involvement in child care and development programs can be a sensitive issue if parents have critical comments to make. Parents must be assured of anonymity, which can be difficult to ensure in a small program where only some parents respond to questionnaires or phone interviews. Staff also need to feel supported to hear critical feedback in a constructive manner.

Understanding the Dynamics of Social Support

Clearly, there are many more questions about the social support impacts of children's participation in early childhood programs than our questionnaire sought to ask. The questionnaire we piloted was deliberately short and non-intrusive for reasons already discussed. However, it would be ideal if research could uncover the dynamics of the support generated by child care and development programs. While respondents in the current study were happy with the programs in which they were involved, it was not clear exactly what aspects of the programs yielded positive support outcomes. Is it connection with other parents or with staff that is most important? Does the program reinforce parents in their role as parents? How can staff be more effective? Are there differing needs between urban and on-reserve programs? How does the program impact parents whose children travel on the bus and have little physical contact with the centre? We recommend that case studies involving both involved and non-involved mothers, fathers and guardians would likely shed light on these questions. Again, this is not a feasible approach for routine program evaluation.

Recommendations

Based on our experience and feedback from *Nutsuma* and *Smun'eem*, we've made the following recommendations:

- **Keep survey instruments simple.** It was clear that parents in the participating communities would not participate in any survey that was more complicated than the one we developed in consultation with staff for the current pilot study.
- **Include staff.** Including staff has several outcomes: they support the process of information gathering; they reflect on their own roles in supporting parents; and they offer another perspective on factors affecting the program's contributions to social support.
- **Include mothers and fathers.** Including as many mothers and fathers as possible provides the most relevant perspectives on social support.
- **Include Elders.** While Elders may not have young children in a program, they are widely acknowledged as the spiritual and cultural centre of most Aboriginal communities. Their insights are important, and their acceptance of the research or program evaluation process may provide a further means of increasing connection with parents.
- **Make contact with unaffiliated parents.** Understanding the perspectives of mothers and fathers who are less involved in or at a distance from the program is critical to understanding the ways in which programs can effectively support all parents. Honoraria or some other incentives may be necessary to obtain their feedback.
- **Talk to parents, face to face:** Short, 15-minute oral interviews based on a simple list of questions are likely to elicit more information than a questionnaire because they can be done in a more personal manner and parents can elaborate and volunteer new dimensions in their commentary.
- **Don't overload staff.** Be careful not to distract staff from their front-line work with paperwork or evaluation activities unless they can see how their program, the families they serve, or they personally will benefit in an immediate, tangible way.
- **Start and end the year with staff interviewing parents.** If staff did interviews with parents at the beginning of the year, it would sensitize staff to possible issues facing a family and help in the centre's plan for supporting families. At the end of the year, a follow-up interview might identify what strategies had worked and what strategies had been less successful.

- **Use an adaptive approach to centre planning.** A formative approach should be taken as centres work with their community to reflect and to plan. Questions would give programs a common language and provide a process by which staff and directors could focus their attention on the issue of how they are part of parents' networks. Taking an adaptive approach, staff would use the questions to refocus their programming and approaches to families on a continuous basis.

Endnotes

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