

Promoting Young Indigenous Children's Emergent Literacy in Canada

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Key elements of an emergent literacy strategy	1
Guiding principles	2
Multi-lateral engagement	2
Introduction	3
Indigenous children	5
Overview of the unique educational challenges faced by Indigenous children	5
Young Indigenous children: A burgeoning population for years to come	5
Young Indigenous children in the United States	7
Young Indigenous children in Australia	7
Children ready for school; Schools ready for children	7
The pivotal role of language in literacy development	8
Contributors to Indigenous children’s emergent literacy	9
Multiliteracies	10
Emergent literacy	11
Literacy acquisition	11
Early intervention for children needing extra support	11
Pedagogical approaches	12
Performance (skills) vs. competence (process) approaches	12
Branded vs. customized curricula	13
Community involvement: Foundational for effective outreach and support	13
Bilingualism and multilingualism	14
Indigenous dialects of English or French	16
Cultural safety	17
Involving family members	18
Home environment as the key setting for emergent literacy	20
Culturally meaningful literacy resources	21
General literacy strategies	23
Storytelling and re-telling	25
Cooperative learning	28
Multiple channeling	28
Outdoor literacy activities	29
Logographic reading	29
Home visiting literacy programs	29
Community wide activities	29
Book drives	30
Emergent literacy strategies using television and computers	30
Gender differences	30
General literacy program examples	30
I. Family literacy programs	31
Family Literacy Program with Mi’kmaq Communities	31

Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPO)	32
Parent-Child Mother Goose Program	32
Yaqui Family Literacy Partnership Program and Project Kaateme.....	32
Bridging the Gap: Parent-child shared-book reading	33
II. Centre-based preschool programs.....	33
Story Thinking Programme.....	33
Moe the Mouse	34
Aboriginal Head Start (AHS).....	34
Sound Foundations Program.....	35
Literacy Nest.....	37
III. School-based programs.....	37
Canadian case study of ten promising school-based approaches.....	37
Kalelemuku (“Stay the course”)	38
Learning Connections	38
Early intervention for children needing extra supports.....	40
First Steps	41
Education and mentoring for practitioners	42
Conclusion	43
Key elements of an emergent literacy strategy	43
Guiding principles.....	44
References.....	45

Executive Summary

In developing strategies to support young Indigenous children's emergent literacy and eventual educational outcomes, it is vital to consider the roles of early childhood practitioners and the relevance of early childhood programs in homes, child care centres, institutions, and community settings. Emergent literacy is the foundation upon which children's reading and writing abilities are built, and is usually acquired between birth and about 6 years of age. It includes, for example, the child's realization that print carries meaning, knowing how books work (front, back, which way to turn the pages), and knowledge about print concepts (e.g., directionality, lines, words, purposes of illustration, etc.) (Hall, 1987).

An earlier literature review, largely limited to work done in Canada (Ball, 2008), assessed current knowledge and described programs that have been implemented to support young Indigenous children's early learning focusing primarily on their language. The current review is intended as a companion to the earlier one, though focusing this time on emergent literacy, and expanding the scope of discussion to include initiatives for young Indigenous children (ages 0-6) in other countries as well as in Canada.

Key elements of an emergent literacy strategy

Literature reviewed for this report lends support for the following seven key elements of a comprehensive strategy to improve literacy development among young Indigenous children:

- (1) Increase provisions for young Indigenous children to have access and to regularly attend quality early learning programs, including home-based, centre-based, and community-based drop-in programs;
- (2) Increase specialist services to ensure early identification of and treatment for hearing, dental, and other health problems that undermine language development and emergent literacy for many young Indigenous children;
- (3) Provide early years practitioners and specialists involved in speech and language, dental, vision, and hearing services, with professional development opportunities to sharpen their insights into how their own culturally-based understandings of early learning and literacies shape their practices; and to enhance their skills in culturally competent collaborations with parents, other caregivers, and other practitioners to ensure culturally appropriate program designs and cultural safety for Indigenous children and families;
- (4) Provide early years practitioners with training and resources to assess family literacy practices and to design group, parent-child, and individualized early literacy programs and early intervention program components for children identified as needing extra supports to develop literacy skills;
- (5) Create books and other print materials, as well as audio-taped story-telling and computer-based literacy materials, through collaboration with Indigenous community members, that:
 - (a) represent Indigenous children and families positively and accurately;
 - (b) represent activities and surroundings that are familiar to many young Indigenous children; and

- (c) reflect the home and community experiences of specific populations of young Inuit, Métis, and First Nations children;
- (6) Involve early childhood services and schools in working together to develop continuity for Indigenous children's literacy development during the critical transition from home to school, focusing especially on schools' enhanced readiness to support these children's holistic development and culturally meaningful learning; and,
- (7) Institute a collaborative program of research involving Indigenous families, early years practitioners, and researchers to document, evaluate, and share promising practices, solve problems of access, attendance, program implementation and efficacy, and improve outcomes of emergent literacy support initiatives.

Guiding principles

These elements must be delivered within a general framework, which recognizes that:

- (1) there is tremendous diversity between and within populations of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis young children and families in Canada and no one approach will be culturally meaningful or effective for all of them;
- (2) young Indigenous children's primary caregivers, including mothers, fathers, grandparents, and other caregivers, are the primary resource for promoting children's language and literacy development, especially in the early years from birth and throughout primary school; and
- (3) any efforts to promote young Indigenous children's health, development, early learning, and eventual success in school and in life requires political will. Structural reforms must improve the quality of life for Indigenous families. Actions must be taken to mitigate the intergenerational effects of the Indian Residential School experience as well as the ongoing disruption of culturally-based lifestyles among some Indigenous populations due to climate change, natural resource depletion, urban migration, and the hyper-assimilationist pressures of globalization.

Multi-lateral engagement

Carrying out a comprehensive early literacy strategy requires parent and community involvement; investments in training and service provision across sectors, and especially in the child care sector; targeted initiatives for children and communities identified as having greatest needs; coordination among federal, provincial, and territorial government agencies; researcher engagement to evaluate intervention approaches; and appropriate funding. Accurately assessing the nature of the literacy experiences of Indigenous children and families, empowering parents, and creating positive interactions with Indigenous communities will support the literacy development process.

Introduction

“Education is our buffalo. It is our new means of survival.” (Chief Barry Ahenakew, quoted by Christensen, 2000, p. xi)

Indigenous Peoples in Canada have long recognized the crucial importance of the early years for nurturing a child’s capabilities, and have identified culturally-based early childhood care and education (ECCE) as a priority for federal investments.

“Our recommendations emphasize the importance of protecting children through culturally-appropriate services, by attending to maternal and child health, by providing appropriate early childhood education, and by making high quality child care available, all with the objective of complementing the family’s role in nurturing young children” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Vol. 5, Ch. 1, s4.1).

ECCE provisions mitigate many risks faced by disadvantaged children and enhance their opportunities for health, development, and social belonging while equalizing readiness for school. Over the past decade, significant strides have been made in the provision of early childhood programs that are community-driven or operated (e.g. Aboriginal Head Start) and that have some Indigenous content. The federal government’s long-term investment in ECCE provisions is a bright light in an otherwise gloomy landscape of federal initiatives for young Indigenous children. Since 1995 federal funding has been committed for Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) programs on reserves, and since 1999 for programs off reserves, resulting in growing capacity in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities to create and operate culturally-based ECCE programs.

Despite these proactive steps, a majority of young Indigenous children, particularly those between birth and three years of age, have little or no access in their homes or communities to quality early childhood programs with Indigenous content. In a report by the special advisor to the federal minister of health, it was estimated that about 15% of young Indigenous children in Canada are supported by Aboriginal Head Start (Leitch, 2008). Engagement in formal school remains uneven and inequities in education attainment persist, and early school leaving rates among Indigenous youth in Canada are still well above national averages (Mendelson, 2006). Educational outcomes are reflected in Indigenous unemployment rates, which are also significantly above the national average (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Programs within Indigenous communities and community-based organizations, as well as in regulated child care sector and teaching professions, continue to rely to a great extent on non-Indigenous staff with the post-secondary credentials. Delayed and low literacy in Standard English or Standard French – the principal languages of public preschools, kindergartens, and schools - is at the heart of many of these problems. In the Australian context, Indigenous leader Lester (1993) argues: “If we don’t get a good education for them [the children], we’re always going to have white advisers in the communities.” There is an urgent need for an intensified focus at the level of government policy and community programs on outreach and support programs for young Indigenous children’s emergent literacy in order to improve their education outcomes and life opportunities.

Low academic readiness at the time of school entry is associated with unavailability of meaningful provisions for early learning (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Achievement gaps between low and high socioeconomic groups widen as children progress through elementary school, but the antecedents of educational inequities arise before children transition from home to school (Alexander & Entwistle, 1988), including health and nutrition deficits that can result in partial hearing loss, attention deficits, and speech and language delays. High quality early childhood programs, early intervention, and preschool programs can have significant impacts on cognitive, social, and behavioural outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Decades of research in neuroscience, developmental psychology, and economics have produced voluminous evidence showing that early interventions that support the development of disadvantaged children have much higher returns than interventions delayed until children have started formal schooling (Heckman, 2006; Tremblay, Barr, & Peters, 2006). Young Indigenous children need increased access to early childhood programs that meet their holistic developmental needs, that provide planned, explicit instructional experiences with literacy, and that are designed to be culturally relevant, personally meaningful, and oriented towards increasing familiarity and competence with Standard English or French.

“I read books late into the night, until I could barely keep my eyes open....I loved those books, but I also knew that love had only one purpose. I was trying to save my life.”
(Sherman Alexie, 1997, pp. 5-6)

This quote from Indigenous novelist Alexie emphasizes that literacy is seen by some Indigenous people as key to achieving important goals. It also illustrates one end of a continuum from print-oriented literacy to a primarily oral orientation that exists among some Indigenous Peoples, conveyed in the following quote:

“Seeing English text bound in a book for me to do the solo act of reading is not an authentic piece of thinking that fits among the voices of my ancestors.” (White Kaulaity, 2007, p. 563)

The point is that there is neither a single form of communication nor a single learning style that characterizes all Indigenous children and families, despite the recurrence of simplistic stereotypes. In any Indigenous community it can be expected that people range across all stages between orality and literacy; furthermore, the importance they confer on these different forms of knowledge varies. Similarly, Indigenous children are diverse and there is no pattern of literacy development and appreciation that should routinely be expected for all of them.

There is general recognition that extra effort and resources are required for young Indigenous children in Canada to develop the kinds of emergent literacy skills needed to successfully meet the task demands of formal schooling. This review identifies some of the challenges to young Indigenous children’s developing early literacy skills and strategies that may be helpful to them. The review draws upon understandings of young Indigenous children’s development and Indigenous pedagogies from the perspectives of Indigenous authors, findings about young Indigenous children’s circumstances, health, development, and early learning drawn from various population level statistics, and reports in the world-wide English language literature documenting outcomes of early childhood programs and early interventions targeting young Indigenous children’s emergent literacy.

A search of both published and informal reports on this topic yielded less than 50 directly relevant sources, many from outside of Canada. Few of these reports offered research-based findings about outcomes, almost none described randomized comparison studies, and only one offered insights about gains attributable to programs and interventions over several years. Clearly, an important component of an effective strategy to enhance literacy learning among young Indigenous children is a planned research program that documents interventions and evaluates effects using group comparisons and longitudinal study designs.

These caveats notwithstanding, some promising work is being carried out in this area. A search of literature in English about young Indigenous children's literacy yielded several reports of outstanding needs, government strategies, and some program successes involving Indigenous (or Native) Hawaiian children and Indigenous (or Aboriginal) Australians. A few reports were also found on programs tailored to Maori children in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Native American children in the mainland United States. For comparison purposes, some information about Hawaiian and Indigenous Australian children is provided here.

This review identifies elements of initiatives in the early years that appear to be helpful and could potentially inform the design of early literacy programs for young Indigenous children, within the context of family literacy, at least on a trial basis. The principles articulated in the current review may be applicable to Indigenous and minoritized young children around the world who tend to be marginalized and experience inequities in learning, health, and development during their formative years.

Indigenous children

Overview of the unique educational challenges faced by Indigenous children

An estimated 370 million Indigenous people live in the world (UNESCO, 2010). Indigenous populations tend to have a young demographic, due to high birth rates combined with low life expectancies. In most countries, young Indigenous children are the most disadvantaged, and their quality of life very often provides suboptimal conditions for health, development, and early learning (Henriksen, 2009). In addition to conditions such as historical trauma and ongoing colonial incursions that sometimes involve sudden, forced relocations from homelands, many Indigenous children experience a combination of risk factors that studies identify as the most significant for educational attainment; namely, minority status, poverty, rural location, minority language, and having a disability or being raised by a parent with a disability (UNESCO, 2009). UNESCO (2008a) argues that "Among the main needs to be met in order for Indigenous children to have access to good quality education are appropriate and accessible schooling opportunities, adequate resources in schools and the cultural relevance of the education offered" (p. 14). Young Indigenous children are arguably the most socially excluded population in the world today. Globally, Indigenous children are less likely to participate in early childhood care and education (ECCE) than the average child in their country. These disparities persist despite increased recognition of the benefits of ECCE for all children and its equalizing impact for disadvantaged children.

Young Indigenous children: A burgeoning population for years to come

In Canada, Indigenous people are commonly known as 'Aboriginal'; they make up about 4 percent of the Canadian population, with 1,311,200 reporting Aboriginal identity in the 2006

census (Statistics Canada, 2006). The 1982 Canadian Constitution Act recognizes three separate peoples as original inhabitants: Inuit, Métis, and North American Indians, commonly known as First Nations. Between 1996 and 2006, the Aboriginal population in Canada grew by 45%, nearly six times faster than the 8% increase of the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2006). The population across all three Indigenous groups is much younger than the Canadian average, with a median age in 2006 of 26.5 years, compared to 39.5 years for all Canadians. The 2006 census enumerated 130,000 Indigenous children under 6 years old, including approximately 7,000 Inuit, 35,000 Métis, 48,000 First Nation children living off reserves and 40,000 First Nation children living on reserves.

Although Aboriginal children and youth currently comprise less than 5% of the population of Canadian children, they are a growing proportion of all Canadian children, particularly in the Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. The Indigenous population will remain significantly younger and maintain its high growth rate relative to the non-Aboriginal population for at least the next 20 years (Steffler, 2008).

As a group, Indigenous families have the lowest quality of life and the shortest life expectancies (Cooke, Beavon, & McHardy, 2004; Salee, Newhouse, & Levesque, 2006). Indigenous children in Canada, as in the U.S., Australia, and elsewhere, experience inequities in infant mortality, health, development, education, and prospects for social inclusion throughout their lives. Indigenous children suffer from significantly higher incidence rates on nearly every health indicator, especially chronic middle ear infections and early hearing loss, respiratory tract disorders and asthma, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), and accidental injury (Adelson, 2005; Kohen, Uppal, & Guevremont, 2007; Smylie & Adomako, 2009). As a population, Indigenous children begin to show difficulties early on in their educational trajectories (Bell, Anderson, Fortin, Ottoman, Rose, Simard, & Spencer, 2004), with gaps in school attainment persisting throughout secondary school (Mendelson, 2006).

These disparities persist despite their explicit recognition and commitments by the federal to remedy the situation (Assembly of First Nations, 2006). They result from a combination of risk factors, especially poverty and associated poor quality of life and social stigma, colonial history and associated depletion of cultural and family assets, racism, and lack of awareness on the part of the general public about how colonial policies created hardships for Indigenous families that continue to the present day (Hackett, 2005). This lack of awareness contributes to lack of political will to invest in structural reforms and deliver on promises made in “Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan” (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1997) – and reiterated in the federal government’s second apology to Indigenous Peoples in 2008 (Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, 2008) – to rectify colonial abuses.

There are common problems facing Indigenous children and families and the early childhood profession in Canada, the United States (U.S.), and Australia. Reports from these three countries provide some examples of strategies to promote Indigenous children’s literacy development and are included in this review.

Young Indigenous children in the United States

American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) children and families share a similar history and many of the same cultures and languages as Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and their socio-economic, health and educational outcomes show a similar pattern of disparities compared to non-Indigenous Peoples. For over two decades, the Head Start program in the U.S. has been the cornerstone of services for low-income young children and families, including for AI/AN children. Little is known about outcomes of various early childhood initiatives for AI/AN children, and not much has been learned about what are the most promising practices to prevent ongoing language endangerment, cultural assimilation, low literacy and low educational attainment. More concerted efforts have been reported from the U.S. state of Hawaii, where Hawaiian and part-Hawaiian students constitute 26% of the overall student enrollment in public schools. This population is rapidly growing. Like Canada, where Indigenous children appear to be disproportionately represented in special needs programs, Hawaiian and part-Hawaiian students represent 37% of the students in special education (Hawai'i DOE Students Information System, 2003).

Young Indigenous children in Australia

In Australia, Indigenous children are the most at-risk group of learners in terms of literacy attainment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Hamston & Scull, 2007; Masters & Forster, 1997), despite considerable attention given to increasing their educational engagement and success. Chronic ear infections and early hearing loss are prevalent and disabling issues for young Indigenous Australians, and is seen to affect their language acquisition and overall development. Just as in Canada, Indigenous Australian children are less likely to have access to or attend preschool than their non-Indigenous peers. They have higher rates of absenteeism beginning in primary school, and as a group they have lower educational attainment early in their school years compared to non-Indigenous children (MCEETYA, 2000).

Hamston and Scull (2007) note that many young Indigenous children move between their Indigenous languages, Aboriginal English – which can be construed as a dialect of English or a language in its own right – and standard (or school-based) Australian English. Australia has been at the forefront of explorations into the nature and implications of the use of non-standard varieties of English, including the distinctive form of the English language used by many Indigenous Australians (Malcolm, Haig, et al., 1999; Malcolm, 2002), discussed subsequently.

Children ready for school; Schools ready for children

For most children there is an uneven transition from early childhood programs up to school entry and the formal, elementary school environment and curriculum (MCEETYA, 2000). Transitional difficulties can affect Indigenous children in particular, especially those from rural and remote communities and those growing up with an Indigenous language or non-Standard dialect of English or French as their primary, home language. A great deal of work is being done in Canada, as in the U.S. and Australia, to plan for children to become more ‘school ready.’ More work is needed to prepare teachers and create routines, and curricula that are ‘child ready,’ especially to provide a welcoming and effective transition experience for Indigenous children.

There is too little acceptance of the capacity of Indigenous children to achieve as well as other students, and as a result Indigenous children frequently are taught in an environment of low expectation (e.g., Australian Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000). Further, research has not established that there are distinctive ‘Indigenous learning styles’ (e.g., ‘learning by doing,’ or ‘visual learning’) that indicate a need for certain pedagogies that may limit children’s opportunities to develop literacy skills on par with non-Indigenous children.

Indigenous children should not be ‘painted with the same brush’ just because Canadian data show persisting inequities in educational attainment among Indigenous children as a group. Similarly, Indigenous children who use a non-Standard variety of French or English, or who arrive at preschool or school with an Indigenous language as their primary language, should not be identified as being “at risk.” A holistic learning model is needed to support children’s transition to formal schooling that includes:

- more attention to the inclusion of culturally meaningful learning activities and content;
- more attention to bilingualism; and
- more effort to reach out proactively to develop relationships with children’s primary caregivers and to involve them as partners in the child’s learning.

Early childhood practitioners tend to be oriented and prepared to observe and engage with individual children and to tailor teaching and learning strategies to build upon each child’s particular learning preferences, needs, and strengths. Herein lays the potential of ECCE to contribute significantly to improving Indigenous children’s emergent literacy and subsequent school success.

The pivotal role of language in literacy development

Linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional competencies are interdependent. While some scholars see literacy and language as inseparable and developing simultaneously, other scholars seeing language as the foundation upon which literacy rests. **For the current purposes, literacy is seen as resting on a foundation of speaking and listening skills, but as primarily involving the development of understandings and skills that lead to reading and writing.**

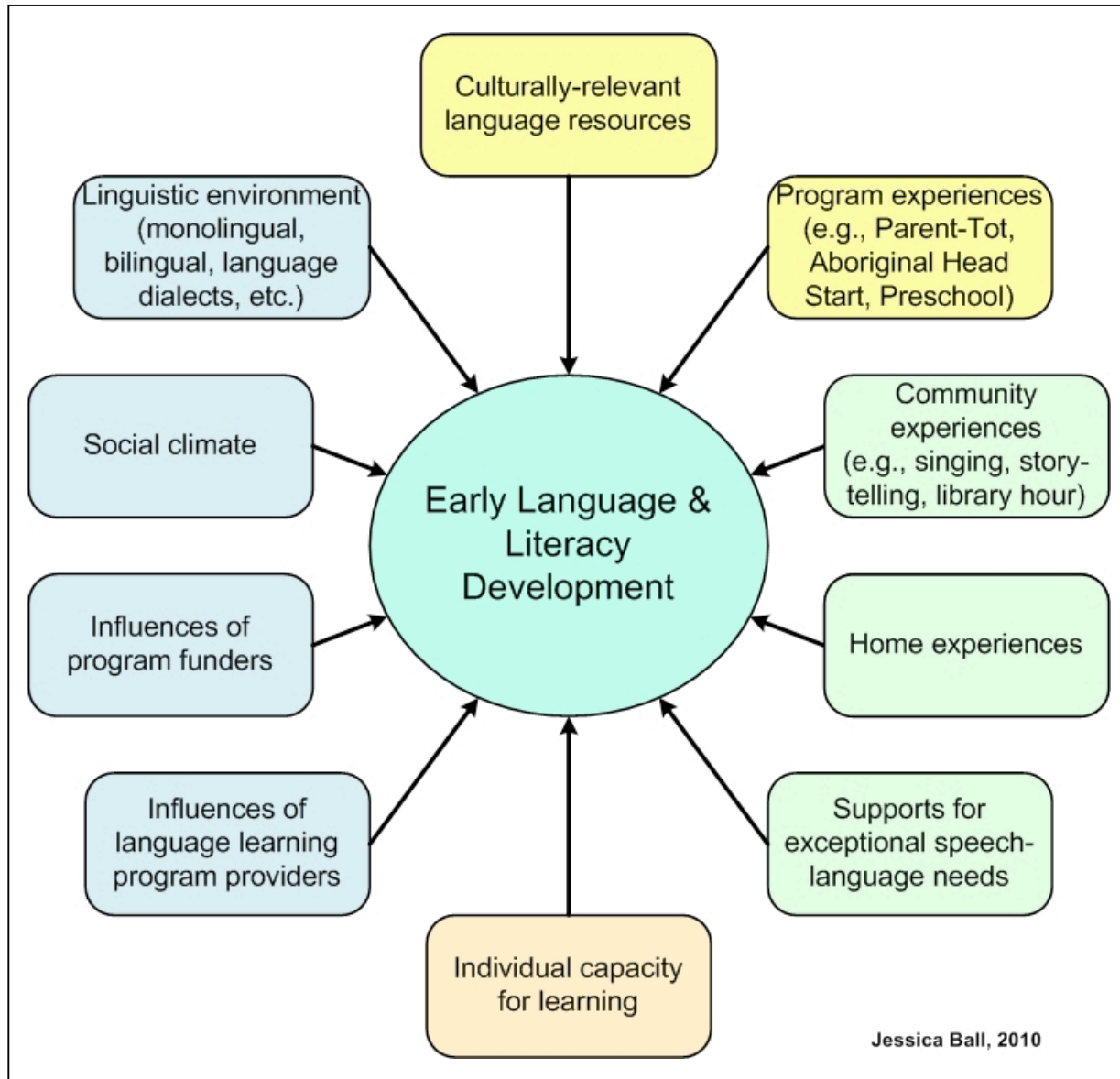
Early language learning contributes in primary ways to learning in all other domains, and makes learning at later ages more efficient and therefore easier, self-reinforcing, and more likely to continue (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). By the time children reach formal schooling, the most common reason that teachers refer a child for special education services is for reading difficulties (Shaywitz, 2003). Because Indigenous youngsters often encounter difficulties early in their formal schooling, there is a risk that early years practitioners will tend to focus attention on emergent reading and writing skills at the expense of attention focused on speaking and listening skills, thereby narrowing the early years curriculum. Yet it is well known that success in school requires vast exposure to, practice with, and proficiency in oral language (Hart & Risley, 1995). Children’s expressive and receptive vocabulary and the ability to engage in extended, connected, verbal discourse are the best predictors of early literacy (Gee, 2004; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Contributors to Indigenous children’s emergent literacy

Many factors can influence emergent literacy, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

10 key contributors to promote Aboriginal language and literacy development



Ecological, holistic, and cultural perspectives emphasize the complex balance of elements in the child’s ecology that must be understood in planning emergent literacy strategies. Children’s early literacy development must be supported through coordinated actions that address their overall health, safety, nutrition, dental health, sensory processing, early learning, and basic needs including housing, clothing, and caregiving arrangements. A holistic emergent literacy strategy must address hearing, dental, and other health problems that are prevalent

among Indigenous children, and that undermine attentional processes, listening, speaking, and overall cognitive development.

As well, low self-efficacy on the part of a child regarding their literacy learning capacity can contribute to low literacy attainment later in school. Low confidence in one's learning capacity is often attributable to poverty, racism, low family engagement in literacy-based interactions with the child, inadequate support for emergent literacy in preschool and school programs, and the inability of some early childhood practitioners and teachers to respond substantially to a child's literacy learning preferences can combine to produce (Dunn, 2001).

It is quite well accepted that many Indigenous children face an unfamiliar language environment when they reach formal schooling. In some schools in Canada and Australia, various English as a Second Dialect programs are available (Partington & Galloway, 2005). But early childhood programs are not set up to recognize and support these children as bilingual and multilingual learners who may need support to transition from home languages to the language medium of preschools or schools. And when mainstream standards of literacy are used to measure literacy outcomes of Indigenous children, a view of these children as deficient tends to prevail. This view, in turn, can lead to low-level and decontextualized literacy instruction and low expectations of students (Rose, Gray, & Cowey, 1999).

Multiliteracies

Literacy develops according to the abilities, needs, and interests of individuals in a given community because of whom those people are or perceive themselves to be. A useful way to think about literacy in relation to young Indigenous children and their families is with reference to the concept of 'multiliteracies' (Cazden, Cope, et al., 1996). Doige (2003) points out that Indigenous forms of literacy have long been part of Indigenous history in Canada. Cree scholar Leroy (1995, p. 6) expresses "how we read and write cannot be separated from who we think we are, and what we think counts as meaning." Battiste (1986), a Mi'kmaq leader in First Nations education in Canada, maintains that the Mi'kmaq people displayed a well-developed literacy in their pictographs, petroglyphs, notched sticks, and wampums, all of which existed long before the arrival of the first French settlers on the east coast. Describing a case of a six-year-old Indigenous Australian child, Clancy and Simpson (2001) illustrate how literacy not only entails how to read and write identifiable genres of texts, but also requires strategic knowledge of how to read social situations and institutional rule systems.

Children may be literate in a variety of ways. Indigenous parents' and Elders' goals for children's development, which often encompass learning to 'read' the signs and symbols on the land in order to subsist on the land, to regulate community life according to changes of seasons, and to participate in collective cultural activities (Ball & Lewis, 2006). The literacies that Indigenous children develop in their families and communities are important not only because these forms of literacy embody certain kinds of cultural knowledge, but also because their literacies can reveal their ways of thinking and understanding the world. For some Indigenous children, their developing literacy may be founded in traditional Indigenous culture and language. Other Indigenous children may be growing up in Euro-western cultural traditions and language.

Emergent literacy

Literacy acquisition

Emergent literacy develops from infancy and encompasses a range of behaviours, skills, and concepts of young children that precede and develop into conventional literacy (Kaderavek & Sulzby, 1998). The linguistic skills of reading and writing depend heavily on two distinct but highly interrelated areas of language awareness: *phonological awareness* (Stuart & Coltheart, 1988) and *graphophonic (or written language) awareness* (Harley, 1995). Both phonological awareness and graphophonic awareness contribute uniquely to conventional literacy outcomes (for review, see Scarborough, 1998).

Phonological awareness is the ability to attend consciously to the sound structure of language, and to implicitly and explicitly represent spoken language as comprising discrete and recurrent sound elements (e.g., phonemes, syllables, words) (Bradley & Bryant, 1985; Torgesen & Davis, 1996; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Wise, Ring, & Olson, 1999). The child must develop skills of:

- phoneme recognition; and
- phoneme segmentation (e.g., knowing what sounds are in ‘hat’ – “/h/ /ae/ /t/”)

Graphophonic or written language awareness begins with developing an implicit and explicit knowledge concerning the fundamental properties of print, including the relationship between print and speech. Two complementary skills must develop:

- the ability to make grapheme-phoneme correspondences, enabling words to be sounded out; and
- the ability to associate visual representations of whole words with their corresponding phonological representations, enabling whole words to be recognized.

As well, written language awareness extends to understanding the functions and forms of punctuation marks and other written language units (Hiebert, 1981; Justice & Ezell, 2000, 2002; Lomax & McGee, 1987; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Early intervention for children needing extra support

Knowledge across both phonological and graphophonic domains is acquired gradually and, for many children, incidentally during the early years beginning with hearing and responding to language from birth. Children who are struggling with speech and/or language development or who have difficulties developing phonological or written language awareness are likely to be ‘at risk’ for subsequent poor literacy outcomes. It is generally believed, though not well documented, that Indigenous children are especially at risk for language delays that can harm their prospects for success in school, good jobs, and quality of life (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). For these children, a strong, deliberate focus on emergent literacy in early years programs is needed ((deLeeuw, Fiske, & Greenwood, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Pedagogical approaches

Performance (skills) vs. competence (process) approaches

There are perennial debates in education about whether ‘performance’ (skill-oriented) or ‘competence’ (process-oriented, focusing on the child’s innate competencies) models of pedagogy are more appropriate and which is more or less oppressive for cultural minorities (Rose, 1999). The position taken in the current review is that the question should not be which approach is better, but rather *how can both approaches be deployed* in the service of goals articulated by primary caregivers in regards to children early learning. Understanding divergent viewpoints on the place, pace, direction, and content of education is important for early childhood practitioners to be prepared for good working relationships with Indigenous family members as well as with school-based educators.

Ideological debate over skills- versus process-oriented pedagogies preoccupies much of the discussion in Canada about Indigenous education. The view of Canadian Indigenous scholar Doige (2003), Australian Indigenous scholars Simpson and Clancy (2001), and some other Indigenous educators in many ways contrasts sharply with the view promulgated by Rose (1999) and those mentioned above. These Indigenous scholars assert that the Euro-Western system of education remains blind to some of the most important aspects of Indigenous education, especially orality, Indigenous epistemologies, and spirituality, and that these must be elevated to a central position in schooling before children will become ready to respond to the demands of mainstream, academic learning.

As Battiste (2000), Hebert (2000) and others have argued that reducing the social exclusion of Indigenous Peoples through language and literacy initiatives requires new approaches. Rather than being based on an assumption that colonial languages and literacies are normative and ideal, new approaches must be based on an assumption that Indigenous languages and Indigenous varieties of English or French, literacies, parenting styles, and pedagogies are equally valid and useful for promoting optimal developmental outcomes.

Taking up these controversial issues, Rose (1999) argues for promoting literacy in the standard variety of the dominant language (Standard Australian English in his context). Rose cites Indigenous Australian leaders who point to the political value of high levels of literacy, and who question the hidden political agenda of those who emphasize traditional Indigenous literacies and pedagogies at the cost of watered-down English literacy education. Indigenous leader Nakata (1996) argues that the job of formal early learning programs and schools is to support children to succeed in education in order to secure their participation in commerce, social life, and political processes. He contends that children’s cultural belonging, knowledge, and spiritual wellness is the proper domain of the family and the outcome of learning within the home and cultural community.

Illustrating the same point with reference to Native American and African American education, Delpit (1988) quotes a parent who demands that *“my kids know how to be Black – you all teach them how to be successful in the white man’s world.”* Rose (1999, p. 7) argues that *“while schools must value children’s cultural identities, the dichotomy drawn by ‘key competence’ theorists between cultural identity and performance in school does not serve the*

interests of marginalized minorities.” As Delpit (1988) puts it: “*those who are most skillful at educating Black and poor children do not allow themselves to be placed in “skills” or “process” boxes. They understand the need for both approaches, the need to help students to establish their own voices, but to coach those voices to produce notes that will be heard clearly in the larger society.*” From this standpoint, early childhood practitioners must recognize the learner’s home culture, language, and literacy and their evolving competencies and use these as *starting points* for exploring with the child and his or her family new ways of meaning and expression; their emergent literacy will eventually enable discursive ‘performances’ that are successful in formal educational contexts.

Reports of various community-based early childhood programs and advocacy organizations (e.g., BC ACCS, 2006a; Canadian Council on Learning, 2007) express how Indigenous parents and leaders in Canada place a priority on educational and personal success for Indigenous children and youth, *and* they also want to sustain their cultural identity and valued traditions. In the past, Canadian institutions presented these as mutually exclusive directions for Indigenous Peoples. Today, early childhood practitioners and other educators can work collaboratively with Indigenous parents in ways that support educational success through positive cultural identity and culturally meaningful learning experiences and curriculum content. As Kiowa writer Momaday (1990, p. 96) emphasized, Indigenous learners must be supported to explore new horizons, including learning to read, while bringing their “Indian-ness” into the new experiences. Supporting literacy development of Indigenous children requires approaches that reflect cultural values, beliefs, and experiences of Indigenous families (Pesco & Crago, 2008).

Branded vs. customized curricula

Another challenge for early childhood practitioners is somewhat opposite to these debates, namely, the inundation of the field of emergent literacy with branded programs presented as the latest and greatest ‘best practices.’ The tendency for governments and training institutions to value innovation often results in early childhood practitioners feeling forced to choose between competing sets of pedagogical approaches or being seduced by tantalizing, new approaches that may not be well matched with learners’ needs. A “both/and approach”, rather than an “either/or approach,” encourages early childhood practitioners to craft a pedagogy that embraces multiple forms of literacy and literacy promotion practices for diverse learners and contexts.

Community involvement: Foundational for effective outreach and support

In some settings, the whole community may be the most effective focus of supports and intervention, especially in communities where singling out individual children or families for special attention or services is not well accepted. ‘*Nothing about us without us*’ is a principle asserted by many Indigenous people (Ball, 2005). The ethics and prospective utility of collaborative approaches involving communities have been demonstrated in cross-cultural practice (Ball 2002; Crago, 1992; Johnston & Wong, 2002; Schieffelin, 1990; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; van Kleeck, 1994). As relationships with community members develop, everyone can be encouraged to make suggestions about the goodness of fit and potential benefits of early learning strategies, tools, and resources. This means that practitioners must have skills for

working collaboratively with the community and not only with the child and his/her primary caregivers.

Participation in local events and developing relationships with parents of infants and young children will expose the practitioner to culturally-based forms of interaction, including language/literacy preferences and conventions practiced by families in their homes and community settings. Supporting emergent literacy must begin with familiarity and a positive attitude towards children's cultural and social milieu, an orientation towards drawing upon strengths, and a willingness to work collaboratively with children and their primary caregivers in environments most comfortable to them. Skill development must use curriculum activities, resources, and content – as well as learning measurement approaches - that are locally relevant and meaningful.

With reference to effective general literacy programs and targeted early interventions, there are many reasons for pursuing an agenda for Indigenous children's literacy development elaborated collaboratively with Indigenous leaders, community-based practitioners, and the children's primary caregivers:

- Indigenous families and practitioners are more likely to participate in initiatives that they have helped to plan and design and in which they see reflections of their own culture and preferred first language.
- Indigenous community leaders and program managers have their pulse on what children, families, and program staff need and are in positions to take actions that respond to established needs, goals, and readiness of community members.
- Programs designed, adapted or adopted by communities are more likely to fit within the community's visions for community development, increasing the likelihood of coherence and coordination of language initiatives with concurrent or consecutive initiatives for children and families.
- Sustainability is increased when a community or community-based organization initiates programs in which they have a sense of ownership, control and pride.

Stiles (1997) identifies community involvement as foundational to the comparative success of four programs in Canada, the United States, and Aotearoa/New Zealand for teaching Indigenous language starting in preschools. Compared to program attempts with poor outcomes, these four programs involved community members not only in creating the program and ensuring cultural relevance, but also in training teachers for linguistic excellence and creating linguistic resources.

Bilingualism and multilingualism

It is important for early childhood practitioners to recognize the high value placed upon Indigenous language revitalization and maintenance by many Indigenous parents and Elders. Further, it is a basic principle of language and literacy development that children should be supported to gain literacy in their primary language, regardless of whether this is French, English, or another language. It is estimated that there are several hundred discrete Indigenous languages and over 60 separate Indigenous language groups in Canada. Some Indigenous people are skilled in code-switching from an Indigenous dialect or variety of English or French. The

extensive use of non-verbal and non-linguistic forms of communication among Indigenous Peoples has also been noted. Indigenous languages and dialects are one way that Indigenous cultures and identities are maintained. It is also important to recognize that any language carries with it a large number of rules and conventions regarding such things as social protocols, turn-taking, question and answer sequences, pausing, and the content and structure of good storytelling. In early childhood programs in dominant cultural settings, Indigenous children may often be confronted with literacy activities that assume culturally-embedded understandings, as well as by assessment practices that are culturally embedded (or culturally biased).

Tabors (2000) defines a bilingual child as a child who is exposed to two languages, no matter what her level of proficiency is in the two languages. Given this definition, Indigenous children are bilingual if they have any contact with family members, caregivers, or a community that is rooted in an Indigenous language or culture. In this sense, early childhood programs for many Indigenous children could be seen as bilingual programs. Tabors (2000) provides an overview of bilingualism relative to how much the dominant language (e.g., English or French, in the context of Canada) and the home language is spoken in the home. These distinctions are useful when planning early literacy strategy and developing effective early intervention for different Indigenous populations and individual Indigenous children. Based on a home language observation, practitioners can work with family members and/or community leaders to develop emergent literacy activities that involve:

- English or French only
- Bilingual learning support in an Indigenous language and English or French
- Indigenous language only
- Cultural and language enrichment

Bilingual learning in early childhood is a complex topic which is beyond the scope of the current review. Briefly, Lightbown (2008) has summarized research showing that:

- children can learn more than one language simultaneously as well as sequentially;
- languages do not ‘compete’ for mental space;
- children can differentiate contexts in which one or another language is more effective for communication; and
- there can be certain cognitive advantages to learning more than one language in childhood.

The use of mother tongues other than English or French in early childhood programs raised a number of challenges for early childhood practitioners, not least of which is the probability that the practitioner does not speak the home language of infants and children whose literacy they wish to support. Little research has been done around the world on this topic, though UNESCO has recently produced a bibliography and a compendium of examples of promising programs around the world (e.g., UNESCO, 2008a,b,c). A positive Canadian example is a Mi’kmaq immersion program in Nova Scotia, where Mi’kmaq early childhood educators provide full immersion preschool followed by elementary school provided in Mi’kmaq with English as an academic subject of study (Timmons, Walton, O’Keefe, & Wagner, 2008). Ball (2010) has reviewed principles and strategies of mother tongue based bilingual/multilingual early education programs.

Indigenous dialects of English or French

As noted, emergent literacy programs in the *home language* of any child has a better chance of being successful (Dunn, 2001). It is important to accept a child's primary discourse as a legitimate mode of expressing themselves. Many children from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds start life with exposure to a dialect of the dominant language that is distinctively different in their home compared to the dialect of the same language used in community and institutional settings, including in early childhood programs and schools (Delpit, 1998; Heath, 1983). In Australia, the predominance of 'Aboriginal English dialects' among a majority of Indigenous children and families is well established (Gould, 2008; Malcolm & Kaldor, 1991; Walton, 1986). In the United States, the phenomenon has been documented in some Native American populations (Leap, 1977) and is generally assumed to exist in others (e.g., Trujillo, 1997). In Canada, this is a recent area of investigation, however a body of research and anecdotal reports indicates a variety of 'Aboriginal English dialects' (Bernhardt, Ball, & Deby, 2007; Ball & Bernhardt, 2008). In these varieties of English or French, the lexical 'content' words are likely to be mainly English or French, but grammatical structures may be hybrids of English/French and Indigenous language grammar structures. English/French grammatical items such as prepositions, reference items, relational verbs, or auxiliary verbs of tense and modality may be absent or transformed. Dialect differences may extend from the ways that words, syllables, and letters are pronounced, to the pragmatics of communication including appropriate protocols for speaking, listening, questioning, interrupting, and so on, and culturally-based ideas of what constitutes a 'good story' that is told in a good way (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Disbray, 2008).

Despite these differences, the meaning potential of Indigenous dialects of English or French is just as functional for spoken communication as are other dialects of English or French spoken by other speech communities. Language differences should not be construed as deficiencies, language difficulties, or disorders (e.g., Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Harkins, 1994; Labov, 1972). However, regardless of the language or dialect children speak at home, literacy skills in Standard English or Standard French are still central to success in formal education as it is delivered in Canada today, unless formal schooling is available in an Indigenous language (as it is for Mi'kmaq children in Nova Scotia and for many children in Inuit Nunagat). Most Indigenous parents are likely to be keen for their child to learn Standard English or French. However, using or at least accepting (i.e., not correcting and certainly not diagnosing as disordered) Indigenous English or French dialects will reduce the cultural and linguistic distance between early childhood practitioners and the child and his/her caregivers. In programs outside the home, this will reduce discontinuities between the home and school setting, increasing the likelihood of successful literacy teaching.

Many parents, while competent in the oral form of the home language, may not read and write their language or speak Standard English or Standard French. The risk of poor educational achievement by these children, especially those whose parents have low education attainment, is especially high (Coppola, 2005). Accordingly, Rose et al. (1999, p. 30) assert that Indigenous youngsters need "concentrated language encounters" over long periods of time to develop proficiency in Standard English, including skills in phonological awareness, reading and writing.

For early childhood practitioners, knowledge of the conventions of Indigenous English or Indigenous French used in the local community is advantageous. There are no guidebooks for dialects of the national languages spoken in homes, and wide variation exists even within cultural communities. To become familiar and comfortable with dialectal conventions, practitioners need to spend time with families and in the community, and ask for help to understand what one is hearing and seeing. Practitioners must learn to observe important conventions and anticipate varieties of language that children may present in home or centre-based programs.

Little has been written about how to negotiate between primary and secondary discourses in order to support emergent literacy through early childhood programs or formal schooling, and practitioners are likely to be unskilled in this area (Eades, 1995). Exploratory work in this area is being carried out in some Canadian provinces under the rubric of ‘English as a Second Dialect’ (ESD) programs (no information about French as a Second Dialect was available for this review). While some of these programs appear to involve little more than adaptations of English as a Second Language or English Language Learning programs, some build upon Australian programs that *teach children code-switching skills*. This is a skill area that needs to be introduced for practitioners aiming to provide supports for language and literacy development of young Indigenous children.

Cultural safety

Cultural sensitivity, cultural competence, cultural safety, and cultural knowledge are prerequisites for the development of culturally meaningful and relevant pedagogies and curriculum content. This is a recurrent theme in the broader literature on health (Papps & Ramsden, 1996; Smye & Browne, 2002), education (Schick & St. Denis, 2005), and speech-language services (Ball, 2007) for Indigenous Peoples and in the literature on supporting emergent literacy (e.g., Simpson & Clancy, 2005; White-Kaulaity, 2007).

Early childhood practitioners must develop an understanding of cultural-historical experiences of groups of Indigenous children and their families with whom they work, especially with regard to local experiences of education (Dunn, 2001; Lankshear, Gee, Knobel, & Searle, 1997). Practitioners cannot be expected to know about the literacy challenges and general educational inequities facing Indigenous children based on their personal experiences and mainstream professional training. They need strong professional development opportunities and access to proactive networks of like-minded educators. This kind of in-service training and networking has also been identified in Australia as a critical component of strategies to enhance literacy development of Indigenous children (Simpson & Clancy, 2005). Promisingly, a growing number of professional education and development programs in Canada are adding cultural competence in working with Indigenous children and families as a starting point to help practitioners develop their reflectivity, confidence, and competence.

Delpit (1995, p. 56) suggests that “If teachers hope to avoid negatively stereotyping the language patterns of their students, it is important that they be encouraged to interact with, and willingly learn from, knowledgeable members of their students’ cultural groups.” Cultural accompaniment works both ways: as an avenue for practitioners to learn about the cultural

practices, goals, needs, and skills of Indigenous children and families whom they hope to serve in their programs, and as an avenue for children and caregivers to learn the cultural practices, goals, demands, and skills of literacy in mainstream settings, including early childhood programs and formal schooling.

Involving family members

Virtually all of the literature written by Indigenous scholars and/or by investigators and government agencies directly involved with Indigenous early learning and formal schooling underscores the critical importance of involving children's primary caregivers in planning, delivering, monitoring, and evaluating programs of support for young Indigenous children. When parents model positive values in relation to reading and writing, and when parents are involved in early language and literacy stimulation programs such as preschools and formal schooling, children's literacy skills develop more readily (Dunn, 1999).

Adult-child shared storybook reading is a context that is naturally occurring for many children and is viewed by many theorists as particularly potent in stimulating emergent literacy as well as speech, listening, and other developmental skills (Bus, 2001; Clay, 1998; Dickinson & Smith, 1994). Other naturally occurring contexts in which young children can develop emergent literacy knowledge are informal interactions with print encountered in the ambient environment in the home and community (see Neuman & Celano, 2001), for example, during play with toys, outings around the community, or in programs for young children. Increased exposure to and participation in literacy events normally enhances children's emergent literacy knowledge in an implicit manner; that is, without direct instruction (Justice & Ezell, 1999).

However, both naturally occurring encounters with print and adult-child shared storybook reading may be relatively lacking in young Indigenous children's everyday experience. Also, early childhood practitioners should not assume that adults or older children in a child's life are literate in Standard English or French, that these people engage in reading or writing with any enjoyment, or that they have time or inclination to engage with a young child in literacy-related activities. Presumptions about the prior exposure of young Indigenous children to the same kinds of literacy events and learning opportunities as are common for non-Indigenous, middle-class children underpin many of the problems that Indigenous children and their teachers face during the early days of formal schooling (Purcell-Gates, 1996). Combined with the possibility of mild to moderate hearing loss, nutritional deficits, and other risk factors, these children may require a more targeted, explicit early intervention.

Involving Family Members

Developing relationships with parents and other caregivers of young Indigenous children is a critical first step in addressing this issue, including listening to their goals for their child's development and their views about language and literacy. Early childhood practitioners should be able to convey simply and clearly the nature and purposes of emergent literacy as seen from the perspective of ensuring the child's optimal development and helping the child to enjoy learning through various sources of text. At the same time, it is important to convey respect for multiple forms of literacy and multiple pathways to promoting children's literacies.

Three common patterns of family involvement are:

- Involving older family members (e.g., parents, grandparents, older siblings) as educators, building on the concept of 'parents as first teachers'.
- Facilitating partnerships between older family members and programs outside the home (e.g., in centre-based programs or activities offered in other community settings).
- Providing opportunities for older family members to enhance their own literacy in English or French, including language fluency, reading, and writing. Family members who are literate in Standard English or Standard French, who enjoy reading and are confident readers, are more likely to engage successfully in story-book reading, language games, and print-based play activities that promote their children's literacy development.

Strategies for involving families include:

- Identifying family and community interests, strengths, needs, and goals for their young child and for the family, and using these insights as a basis for program planning.
- Exploring with parents and other community members the historical, political, and social significance of language acquisition and literacy in the community.
- Involving parents and other community members in designing, implementing and evaluating programs, including whether to base programs in homes, community centres, in rotating sites, or using mobile centres such as book lending library vans, etc.
- Sharing information about program events with parents and the community.
- Encouraging family members to talk, sing, tell stories, and hold conversations with children that extend beyond giving directions or speaking about household matters.
- Using the family's home language or at least their communication styles in communications with family members as much as possible.
- Inviting Elders, extended family, and community members to be involved in the program either as paid staff or as volunteers.

Toolkits for adult family members and older children can include a variety of knowledge, skills, and practical resources for promoting phonological awareness and print awareness. **Pihana Na Mamo** is a toolkit for parents produced by the Hawaiian Education Programs Section of the Department of Education. Two booklets offer tips and suggest resources for parents to stimulate phonological awareness and print awareness as their children approach formal school age (www.pihananamamo.com).

Home environment as the key setting for emergent literacy

Literacy develops in the context of everyday life in the home from birth (Teale & Sulzby, 1989; Vygotsky, 1986). This is an aspect of childhood learning that is determined by culture and lifestyle (Heath, 1983), as well as by access to language and literacy resources, programs, and services. The Canadian Child Care Federation focuses on supporting early childhood practitioners to provide a holistic model of child care within community settings. Working with Indigenous leaders in early learning is part of the core work of the Federation and one of the key ingredients to achieving excellence in early learning and child care. In the United States, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) position statement, “Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity: Recommendations for Effective Early Childhood Education,” emphasizes that children learn and grow to their fullest potential when the home language and culture are valued and integrated within the curriculum and learning environment (NAEYC, 1995). Both organizations recognize that the language and culture of the home is what children know and it is the basis for their unique perspective on life and on learning.

McCarty and Watahomigie (2001) borrowed from Tohono O’odham linguist Ophelia Zepeda the concept of the “literacy continuum,” suggesting that teachers can draw on the events and practices from the home and continue them or use them as a base upon which to build when children enter their program. “Within this continuum, Indigenous children are encouraged to connect orality with literacy” (p. 493). They note that this continuum depends upon a broad definition of literacy including not only printed text but other kinds of literacies and literacy sources. Navajo scholar White-Kaulaity (2007, p. 581) found that during preschool, Native American children, especially those living in isolated communities on reserves, did not have much experience of libraries or bookstores. However most had experience with listening to stories generated by the storyteller – usually a relative with whom the child is close - sometimes while looking at pictures in books.

Similarly, in the context of Australia, Malcolm (2002) has encouraged a careful examination of the communication experiences that young Indigenous children are likely to have in their home and community environments, and to build on this naturally occurring learning context as well as to assess children’s prior learning in oral language, expressive arts, and literacy when they reach school. He emphasizes that just because Indigenous children may not have experiences with the kinds of reading, writing, and listening that is valued in formal schooling, it is important not to overlook the relevant experiences they may have had.

A primary goal of collaborations with parents and other caregivers during infancy and early childhood is to stimulate speaking and listening skills. It would appear that Indigenous Peoples share among them a strong appreciation for listening and for encouraging youngsters to be attentive to their surroundings, to listen carefully, to remember what they see and hear, and to learn through observation and listening. Some Indigenous people may have some hesitation about the value of actively engaging in verbal exchanges with very young children, and while this appears to be instrumental in stimulating oral language development, sensitivity is needed on the parts of early childhood practitioners about how this topic is approached with parents and others caregivers.

Research shows that children in homes that are strongly oriented to print and reading often become literate without formal instruction (Bissex, 1980). Typically, however, children need instruction in phonemic awareness in order to become literate (Ehri & Wilce, 1985). And children growing up in homes that are not oriented to print-based literacy are likely to need intensive supports to develop literacy skills. Thus, an important component of early childhood initiatives with Indigenous families is to work with children's primary caregivers as early as possible after a child's birth to encourage family members to expose the child to picture books and simple story books (e.g., Freeman & Bochner, 2008).

Culturally meaningful literacy resources

A key to successfully engaging young Indigenous children and their caregivers in print-based literacy activities is having resources that are culturally relevant and meaningful to the particular group of children and caregivers served by a program. There is an outstanding need in Canada for books and other print materials that generally present Indigenous children and families positively and accurately, and that reflect the home and community experiences of young Indigenous children specifically. Moreover, there are few resources to support literacy development in any Indigenous language, and in some communities, particularly those where Cree, Mohawk, and Inuttitut are spoken, children's primary language is an Indigenous language and emergent literacy should be encouraged in that language.

BC ACCS Curriculum Boxes. B.C. ACCS has produced Curriculum Boxes to support various components of early childhood education programs, designed by Dr. Jan Hare, an Ojibway scholar of Indigenous literacy based at the University of British Columbia. They are available on a loan basis to community-based programs (BC ACCS, 2010). A "School Readiness" Curriculum Box (Box #7), focusing on literacy and numeracy. The box includes a tag reader kit, magnetic phonics letter set, alphabet blocks, alphabet Bingo cards and wooden disks, wordless books, CDs, DVDs, and books selected to appeal to First Nations children and families (e.g., *The Northern Alphabet*). The kits include information for practitioners on each learning objective, and corresponding activities for children and parent/community involvement.

Compendium of education resources for AHS programs. A compendium of language, literacy and early learning resources was compiled by Ball and Moselle (2001) with funding from the AHS in Urban and Northern Communities program of the Public Health Agency of Canada. The compendium is intended to support the educational component of AHS, and includes over 800 resources that portray Indigenous children and/or situations and/or were created specifically for Indigenous children, families, and social institutions, with item descriptions indicating the type of resource, target age range, and cultural group depicted.

An update of this compendium or a fresh start focusing on specific regions or language/culture groups would be timely as part of a general intensification of efforts to improve literacy and education outcomes for Indigenous children. An article by Moomaw & Jones (2005) provides a list of quality Native American children's books that would lend themselves well to early childhood programs within the home, community, or child care centre. Examples of books include *Jingle dancer* by Muscogee author Cynthia Leitich Smith (2000), *Did you hear wind*

sing your name? by Oneida author Sandra De Coteau Orié (1995), and *Baseball bats for Christmas* by Michael Arvaarluk Kusugak (1996). Books featuring boys and men involved in the lives of young Indigenous children can help to engage boys and may be especially appealing for fathers and father figures to read to their children. Canadian examples include: *Jason's new dugout canoe* by Joe Barber-Starkey, illustrated by Paul Montpellier (2000); and a series of books written and illustrated by Darrell Pelletier (1992), including titles such as *Alfred's summer*, *The big storm*, and *Alfred's first day at school*.

CIRCLE program. The CIRCLE program, developed in the Modern Language Centre of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, with funding from the Ontario Regional Office of the Ministry of Indian and Northern Affairs (1987), remains a unique and still useful integrated language/literacy resource. A series of increasingly more complex stories feature First Nations characters, traditional and rural cultural activities and situations, and engaging plots often involving extended families and animals found in Canada's hinterlands. Though targeted at lower primary school-aged children, these are seriated "Listen and Read" books that might work well for older family members to participate with young children while listening to stories on tape.

Inuit story books. The need for culturally and linguistically meaningful resources is felt most strongly in Inuit Nunagat, including Nunavut, Nunavik, parts of the Northwest Territories, and Labrador, where books, songs, stories, posters, and materials for activities in local Indigenous languages and dialects are in very short supply. These are costly and time-consuming to develop, and generally beyond the capacity of individual community-based programs to develop. A project in Nunavik entitled "Let's Tell A story" ("*Unikkaangualaurtaa*") demonstrates a productive approach to gathering community members together to tell stories, record the stories, and create a song, craft, and game to accompany each story. The volume of collected stories and activities has been distributed to Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) programs throughout Canada (Avataq Cultural Institute, 2006). A subsequent project brought Inuit early childhood educators together to develop a set of Inuttit language books for young children in child care (Rowan, in press).

Generated stories. Collecting stories and illustrations of stories from children, older siblings, and adult family members is another promising approach to gathering locally relevant, meaningful story material. Short books generated by children themselves may hold great interest to the children and may also facilitate their participation in telling and embellishing stories with personal meaning.

Translated books. Canadian children's book authors might be engaged in projects to produce Indigenous language versions of their books. For example, in 2008, Canadian author Robert Munsch made over a dozen of his children's story books available to the government of Greenland for translation into Greenlandic.

Writing resource kits. Families can also benefit from being provided with kits, including writing implements (paper, writing tablets, pencils, crayons, chalk, felts), and letter shapes (blocks with letters, letter shaped toys, puzzles, magnets, etc.).

General literacy strategies

Evidence of the growth of literacy in children before they can read or write has been the subject of considerable research in a number of specific areas, including the effects of the home culture (Heath, 1983; Sulzby & Teale, 1991; Sulzby & Zecker, 1991; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988); story reading (Evans, 1994; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984; Mason & Au, 1990; Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994); environmental print (Goodman, 1986; Hall, 1987; Suzby & Teale, 1991); and the alphabetic principle and decoding (Adams, 1994; Byrne, 1997; Stanovich, Cunningham, & Kramer, 1984).

A “whole program” approach

The early childhood program can be infused with literacy learning opportunities. It is conceivable to orient an entire full-day preschool program with early literacy as an organizing framework that extends throughout outdoor activities, free choice, play-based learning centres, circle time, and even meal times and drop off and pick up routines. The emphasis of a developmentally appropriate emergent literacy support program is “on providing children with daily opportunities for holistic, functional, meaningful experiences with spoken and written language” (Teale & Martinez, 1988, p. 10), which is an approach that is consistent with the way young children learn (Weir, 1989). In this way, literacy becomes an integral part of “doing school” (Kantor, Miller, & Fernie, 1992, p. 199).

Walter (1994) and others state that early childhood programs that support emergent literacy should be:

- feasible;
- prepared to build on what children know already about language, reading, and writing
- informed by research on speech and language acquisition, early literacy, and early childhood pedagogy;
- combine empirically validated learning activities;
- incorporate culturally-based curriculum content;
- provide purposeful instruction at the large group, small group, and individualized level;
- involve children’s primary caregivers in the program;
- include some home-based parent-child activities; and
- delivered in developmentally appropriate ways.

When a practitioner observes or assesses a child or talk with family members, it is important to learn about and respond to:

- the child’s overall developmental health and wellness;
- the languages spoken in the home;
- the nature and level of stimulation of literacy in the home;
- the child’s stance, or orientation, to language, reading, and writing; and
- the child’s specific literacy interests and approaches to learning activities.

Surveys of research into early literacy (e.g., Adams, 1994) identify several broad areas important to literacy development in early childhood:

- Spoken language competence
- Story knowledge
- Book-handling knowledge
- Print knowledge
- Reading knowledge
- Writing knowledge
- Family literacy events

Key strategies to support emergent literacy in early childhood programs

To be most effective, the early childhood program – whether based in homes, centres, drop-in locations in the community, or rotating settings as in mobile programs – must be oriented towards literacy, but it is not enough to provide exposure or to offer choices for speaking, listening, emergent reading, and emergent writing. Rather, the practitioner needs to *instruct, guide, and give feedback directly and explicitly in various skills areas*. For children who show little or no interest in literacy activities, research has shown that they are unlikely to choose literacy activities during free play or play centres or other times. The practitioner needs to work with individual children, and in small groups that include these children, to stimulate interest and encourage growing confidence on the part of the child in literacy areas.

A longitudinal study of 3- and 4-year-old children on the Lummi Indian reservation in northwest Washington state, where more than 60% of the children showed developmental delay in emergent literacy for more than 60% of the children, yielded the following recommendations (Walter, 1994).

To stimulate reading and writing, practitioners should cultivate children's:

- increased level of interest in print material
- print awareness
- interpretation of environmental print
- pretend reading
- interest in name representation
- writing development, starting with scribbling and drawing

Key strategies to support emergent literacy in early childhood programs

- (1) Encourage children to participate in read-alouds more than once a day. Big Books are useful for large group, shared, dialogic, and cloze reading where children provide the missing word or phrase. As well, read anything meaningful to children, from recipes, to instructions for games, to invitations, to labels on food.
- (2) Encourage children to explore books and stories, including pretend reading, and relating provided stories to their own experiences. A Library Corner that includes open-faced shelves, accommodates up to four children, and includes props for dramatic enactments, is invaluable for this purpose.
- (3) Encourage children to explore writing through a writing table, including providing crayons, pencils, markers, and paints to draw, scribble, and pretend write. A Writing Table that includes a variety of materials to which children can return throughout the program (during free choice, and learning centres) is invaluable for this purpose.
- (4) Make use of print in the classroom, developing an understanding that speech can be written down, and appreciation of print as useful for real purposes (not simply labeling objects and posting signs).
- (5) Use small-group activities with the same children in the groups over a few weeks, and work with children on a one-to-one basis as much as possible.
- (6) Work together with parents as partners in their children's literacy development. In particular, encourage parents and other caregivers to engage with and encourage children even when they make mistakes or their performances make no apparent sense (e.g., pretend reading, pretend writing, scribbling, made up songs).

These elements are all part of a comprehensive “whole program approach” to support emergent literacy.

Storytelling and re-telling

Emergent literacy programs can build upon the oral tradition of Indigenous Peoples using stories that reflect children's family, community relationships, environments, and culture (Zepeda, 1995). Historically and today, Indigenous Peoples share cultural knowledge through storytelling (Archibald, 2008). Stories may be used to provide a sociocultural and historical account of community knowledge, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of history, language, culture, traditions, and identity (Fixico, 2003). Anishnaabe scholar Sharla Peltier notes that storytelling is: *“a natural area that we as Aboriginal people can draw upon as a form for oral history, language retention, extending memory capacity, and learning and practicing formal English language. It is also a great way to bring adults and Elders in to connect with children and to make program content and activities culturally relevant”* (cited in Ball, Bernhardt, & Deby, 2006). Similarly, Ottman, Abel, Flynn, and Bird (2007) and McKeough, Bird et al. (2008) assert that storytelling can play a critical role for Indigenous children acquiring language and learning to read and write.

While little empirical research has focused on the development of Indigenous children's storytelling and its cultural roots, there is much research on narrative capabilities of children and the use of narrative with young children in general, and on the practice of dialogic reading to

support children's emergent literacy (e.g., Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2006; Peterson & McCabe, 2004). Instruction focused on oral storytelling decreases cognitive demands placed on young learners, relative to written text (Hidi & Hildyard, 1980). Francis and Reyhner (2002) argue that once children acquire an understanding of story structure and are proficient in creating and sharing stories and legends, they are well positioned to use them in school in literacy-related language tasks. These investigators explain that pairing oral storytelling with their written form supports literacy development because "when discourse patterns that correspond to the children's experience with Indigenous oral forms are recognized and incorporated into the school-based literacy programme, discontinuities between community and classroom begin to break down" (p. 52). When oral stories are written by children, or represented in drawings and writing with the assistance of teachers, they begin to think deliberately about the story's structure, and verbal expression is transformed into composing a text.

Family involvement in storytelling. Caregiver-child conversations that help to interpret, reminisce, and recount experiences are central to the development of a child's beginning personal narratives (Haden, 2003; Peterson & McCabe, 2004). Several emergent literacy programs incorporate storytelling, and the central role that older family members can play using storytelling. Stories for and by young children are often spontaneous narratives recounting immediate, local events. Given that some Indigenous children may be more accustomed to spontaneous telling and re-telling of personal narratives of family events, they may respond most readily to caregivers or practitioners engaging with them in spontaneous, co-generated storytelling. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the role of scaffolding in social relationships. Thus, practitioners can work with parents and other caregivers to encourage children to tell their stories of everyday events and provide guidance and feedback that reaches slightly beyond what the child has generated. This process stimulates more confident and complex narratives. Over time, this externally guided process is internalized by the child and becomes part of his or her inner thought.

Storytelling tips for parents or practitioners

- Tell a story about something that has just happened, or ask the child to tell about something that has happened. (Use of hands, puppets or other things can enhance the dramatic aspect of the telling.)
- Ask the child to participate with them to embellish the story.
- Engage in re-telling activities, asking questions about who did what in the story, what happened in various sequences, and so on.
- Work with the child to express various aspects of the story on paper, poster board, in the sand, on a board or writing tablet (for example, thinking of a name of an important person in the story and writing the first letter of that name, or the written word for an important object in the story, such as a fish, fire, or fort).

Stories featuring dialogue. A report by White-Kaulaity (2007) of Navaho adults' recollections of listening to stories told to them by relatives during their early childhood experiences suggests that Indigenous children may prefer stories with lots of dialogue. For example, one interviewee described how he selects books in which he can "listen to people"

talking, rather than reading long descriptions (because of this, Canadian Cree author Thomas King's novels are among his favourites). Another interviewee described how, even as an adult he enjoyed reading Archie comic books and "hearing" the dialogue. This report gives a clue, perhaps, to the kinds of storybooks that might be enjoyed by Indigenous children.

Individual child preferences. Early childhood practitioners are generally skilled in observing and acting upon young children's individual and group learning preferences. When there are just one or a few Indigenous children in a larger, culturally diverse group, it is especially important to pay attention to individual literacy preferences. Practitioners can observe, discuss together, and ask individual children directly about the following:

- What kinds of literacy activities does the child enjoy most?
- What ways of involving the child in making decisions about their own literacy learning seem to be working well?
- What genre of language and literacy material does the child prefer (e.g., rhymes, songs, stories from a book, generated stories using puppets or other dramatic play)?
- Which stories does the child prefer?
- What are the child's preferences for literacy activities in terms of solitary, paired, or group activities?
- Does the child prefer to engage in these activities indoors or outdoors?
- Where in the indoor or outdoor space of the home or centre does the child gravitate to literacy activities?

Adult-child shared storybook reading.

The positive impact of participation in shared storybook reading interactions on overall oral language development, early phonemic awareness, and early literacy competence is well established (e.g., Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1999; Senechal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Dalrymple, 1998; Whitehurst, Falco et al., 1988). Again as Vygotsky (1978) described, emergent literacy is advanced through adult mediation and scaffolding, as well as through the child's own active interest and engagement as an increasingly literate partner (Justice & Ezell, 1999). Small-group sessions over 30-minute periods, featuring adult-child shared storybook reading can be designed to actively engage children in literature-based activities featuring an implicit focus on oral and written language.

Shared Storybook tips for parents and practitioners

Sessions can include two components:

1. Adult-child shared storybook reading.

- Use a variety of storybooks including different genres (e.g., narrative, rhyming) and formats (e.g., big books, lift-the-flap).
- Promote active involvement by asking children to predict what the story will be about, what will happen, and so on.
- Use dialogic reading strategies (Whitehurst et al., 1988) to promote oral language and literacy orientation, by asking open-ended questions, responding to children's interests, giving positive feedback.

2. Story re-telling. After the story reading, ask children to re-tell various parts of it, and to participate in mapping out the story on a felt story board, in drawings, or on a chalk board.

Understanding the purpose of text

Drawing on experience in Australia, Malcolm (2002) suggests that young Indigenous children entering formal schooling may need particular help in the following areas:

- Using basic strategies to locate, select, and read texts;
- Recalling and discussing ideas from texts;
- Understanding that people write about both real and imagined experience;
- Integrating strategies to interpret and discuss ideas, information, and events in texts;
- Giving possible reasons for varying interpretations of a text;
- Justifying one's own interpretation of ideas, information, and events in texts;
- Discussing and comparing texts to examine issues, ideas, and effects;
- Synthesizing information from different sources to construct reasoned responses;
- Drawing on strategies, including sociocultural context, for understanding of reading;
- Reading critically and discussing a wide range of texts;
- Identifying ways that text structure can influence reader reactions;
- Conveying ideas about texts in a compelling way;
- Relating specific issues and ideas in texts to wider social experiences.

Cooperative learning

Indigenous cultures are often described as traditionally 'collectivist,' 'communal,' and 'non-competitive.' Thus, some authors have encouraged cooperative rather than competitive approaches to learning activities with Indigenous children, including shared literacy experiences, emphasis on the development of skills in the context of authentic literacy episodes, and working and talking in groups to promote social and cooperative skills (Hirst & Slavik, 1989). The Shared Book Experience Approach is a cooperative learning strategy developed by Holdaway (1980) in response to concerns that Maori children in Aotearoa/New Zealand were not succeeding in conventional reading and language programs. Two goals for instruction are that the children are not segregated by ability, and that children of different cultural backgrounds experience success. Using Big Books, the practitioner's role is to *induce, rather than directly teach*, a reading process. As the class enjoys books, active participation is encouraged. Children respond in unison, discuss, and become involved in extension activities. The activity is presented to involve children in using their visual, auditory, and kinesthetic senses. Each child's progress is monitored individually and there is no competition among peers.

Multiple channeling

Multiple channelling is a term coined in the 1980s to draw attention to the various senses and motor movements involved in learning and the potential to explicitly engage multiple channels in various learning tasks (Quina, 1989). For example, an action research project in B.C. provided descriptive evidence that using songs and movement enhanced young Indigenous children's acquisition of pre-reading skills (Walton, Canaday, & Dixon, 2010). Anishnaabe educator Sharla Peltier suggests that this is: "*a fantastic way to reach and draw out those children who are challenged with attention deficits, hearing impairments due to otitis media, autism spectrum, and severe speech or language delays... The drum, shakers, and games involving rhythm and sequences of movement like social and ceremonial dancing would be excellent program components, all with a view to nurturing communication skills*" (cited in Ball, Bernhardt, & Deby, 2006). The involvement of children and older family members in singing,

such as community song evenings and singing groups, is another example. Many Indigenous language immersion programs, such as the Maori Te Kohanga Reo (Durie, 1997; King, 2001) and the Punana Leo Program in Hawaii (Wilson & Kamana, 2001), use ‘total physical response.’ Hirst and Slavik (1989) report effective use of visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic channels in language education practices with Native American children. This concept is very familiar to early childhood educators, who often use singing with movement activities to engage children in activities that enhance phonemic awareness, expand vocabulary (e.g., ‘Head and shoulders, knees and toes’), and storytelling (‘the eensy weensy spider’).

Outdoor literacy activities

Many Indigenous early childhood practitioners have advocated an emphasis on outdoor activities, where speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills can all be developed, especially through storytelling and re-telling. Letter writing and recognition activities can also involve outdoor play with sticks as writing implements, stones, leaves and so on to create letter forms in sand and so on.

Logographic reading

Environmental print refers to text that children are exposed to in community settings, such as labels on groceries, advertising billboards, signs on buildings, posters in windows, and so on. Logographic reading refers to reading while being presented with the text information in a context that also provides information about the item and clues about the meaning of the written text. Research has shown a relationship between logographic reading and oral and visual/pictorial skills. In contrast, conventional reading involves being able to read decontextualized print, and requires graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic information. Some scholars have reported that logographic reading can be fun for young children and can help them to understand that print is meaningful and useful.

Home visiting literacy programs

Beyond encouraging family members and providing literacy resources to enhance literacy opportunities in the home, discussed earlier, some programs involve structured, regularly scheduled sessions delivered in the home by practitioners to primary caregivers and children. Home visiting can sometimes be a useful approach to building relationships with parents and other family members (often grandparents) who are caring for infants and young children. Once a relationship is formed, caregivers can be encouraged to participate in family and community activities that promote language. Programs to promote attachment, bonding, positive social interaction, and language enhancement at home require a high degree of flexibility and ingenuity and can be expensive because of the travel and visiting time required for individual home visits. Home visitors require special training, easy access to supervisory consultation, and back-up support. Smith-Moran (2005) produced a curriculum to prepare home visitors to work with parents using the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) program, discussed subsequently, after a number of Indigenous home visitors were overwhelmed by the complexities of the process of ‘entry’ into Indigenous communities and homes.

Community wide activities

Community-wide special events and ongoing programs can enhance the literacy environment for children. Community wide activities involving storytelling and dramatic

enactments of stories can also be an enjoyable way to promote the full use of language and exposure to print materials while offering children, youth and adults the social safety of a provided role or mask. The use of dramatic play in ways that are grounded in the cultures of children and families participating in early childhood education programs has been discussed in the literature (Roopnarine, Suppal, Shin, & Donovan, 1999).

Book drives

Gathering donations of new and gently used books for infants, toddlers, and young children can help to fill the gap in access to printed material for many Indigenous children, particularly those living in poverty, and in more remote areas. This approach has been used successfully in Ontario following an appeal by the Lieutenant Governor (CBCA, 2007). In New Brunswick, the Eskasoni First Nation used a book drive to gather materials that were then sorted by age level and distributed on loan to family homes using a monthly rotation. This approach could be coupled with home visiting to share approaches to using the books with children and to discover children's literacy preferences and needs, and by community events following the example of Parent-Child Mother Goose, supporting parent involvement in emergent literacy activities.

Emergent literacy strategies using television and computers

Most young Indigenous children have access to radio and television. A growing number of Indigenous households have computers and access to the Internet. There is a striking lack of program reports and research commenting on how computers or television have been used, or could be used, for home-based or centre-based literacy programs targeting children under 7 years old. It would seem that there is tremendous potential for both television mediated and computer mediated early literacy learning supports, from story telling to alphabet recognition to gross motor activities that combine rhymes, songs, and guessing games. A further search and assessment of the literature focusing on media and emergent literacy would be useful.

Gender differences

Before concluding this section, it should be noted that recent research identifies specific challenges faced by many boys in the transition to school and throughout schooling. Research indicates that gender is a key predictor of literacy attainment. As a group, boys tend to achieve significantly lower scores on reading and writing benchmarks than girls (Aman & Ungerleider, 2008; Hamston & Scull, 2007). Combined with other key variables including low socioeconomic background, racism and associated social exclusions, and the possibility of a home language or dialect other than Standard English, the relationship between gender and literacy needs to be explored. Research on the kinds of literacy strengths and challenges of boys versus girls would be useful to guide early childhood practitioners.

General literacy program examples

Most reports of emergent literacy programs for young Indigenous children in Canada and elsewhere fall into three categories. The following summary of program examples uses these categories:

- (1) Family literacy;
- (2) Centre-based programs;

(3) School-based programs.

Many programs are hybrids, especially centre-based preschool programs that make a significant commitment of staff time and resources to work with parents both in their homes and in the centre-based program.

I. Family literacy programs

Reciprocal teaching and learning among family members can create a home environment that supports emergent literacy. Family literacy programs recognize and build upon existing linguistic forms of communication (whether in an Indigenous language, dialect, French or English), literacy learning preferences, as well as culturally appropriate, meaningful content themes.

Family Literacy Program with Mi'kmaq Communities

A culturally-based family literacy program with Mi'kmaq communities Ten culturally-based, themed modules were developed, piloted, and implemented in consultation with members of Mi'kmaq communities in Atlantic Canada (Lennox Island, PEI, Pictou Landing, NB, Afton, NS, and Eskasoni, NS) (Timmons, Walton et al., 2008). Interestingly, parents asked that the program stress decoding, phonics, and comprehension strategies, homework, and motivational strategies to encourage their children to read more often and become better readers. Parents asked that their culture and heritage be reflected in the modules. Parents also requested that the program include some non-reading activities, especially strategies for dealing with bullying and parenting.

From 2003 to 2006, 31 families with children aged 5 to 12 years participated in the 10-week program. Indigenous facilitators from the communities received training to implement the program with families. Research funded by the National Literacy Secretariat and by the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network yielded encouraging results. Children advanced on average more than seven months in their basic reading skills compared with two months advancement among wait-listed children. In particular, listening comprehension significantly improved with over two years' advancement over the 10 weeks compared to 2.5 months for the wait-listed group. Participating children showed increased interest in reading. As well, many parents reported increases in family bonding and their own literacy and skill in knowing how to help their children with reading, and parents showed great interest in their children's education.

This program, as well as the culturally adapted Story Thinking Program, described subsequently, are good examples of programs that created modules that were original to the communities where they would be delivered, and were ultimately owned by the communities. Although involvement of community advisory committees and the module design phase can be time consuming and somewhat costly, the approach has significant advantages over importing branded programs. When a community is involved in identifying their own needs, goals, and program preferences, they are more likely to participate and to sustain the program if it shows early promise. The modules created in these two Canadian family literacy programs may be useful as examples or potentially adaptable curricula for other early literacy initiatives.

Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)

HIPPY, described earlier, originated in Israel shortly after the Jewish holocaust when many young parents had not had the benefit of learning from their own childhood experiences about parents' involvement in supporting children's literacy development. Following a highly structured and prescriptive teaching and homework curriculum, role plays by trained home visitors show parents how to teach pre-literacy and literacy skills to their 3-5 year-old children at home. Parents are instructed to spend 10-45 minutes a day in interactions their child about a provided storybook, puzzle, or learning game. The B.C. Aboriginal Infant Development Program has set out to create a "treasure box" of culturally-based books, toys, and other media for HIPPY programs involving Aboriginal parents. Over a dozen First Nations in British Columbia are registered with Aboriginal HIPPY. A study by LeMare and Beatch yielded insights about the impacts of HIPPY on the home visitors themselves (Beatch, 2006), as well as the generally positive program experiences of parents in five First Nations in B.C. (LeMare, Harkey & Beach, 2007).

Parent-Child Mother Goose Program

While the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program (P-CMGP) has not been evaluated in terms of its effectiveness with Indigenous children and families, its simplicity, pace, and focus recommends it as a potentially useful approach (Joshi, 2006). P-CMGP began in 1986 in Toronto in low-income neighbourhoods. It tends to target parents who have low incomes, are isolated, educationally disadvantaged, are new to the country or city, and/or are lacking in positive role models for parenting. The program aims to support language development through the relationship between parents and their children as well as to give parents experiences and skills in engaging in language-mediated play. Program activities use shared words, actions, and images and feelings of rhymes and stories. Like the HIPPY program, teaching is directed to adults. In a ten-week series of sessions, two teachers teach the parents rhymes, songs, and stories to use with their children. Printed versions of the rhymes and songs are supplied at the end of a series of meetings. Instruction in the program is delivered at a slow pace, with material repeated. Issues and questions are discussed as they arise. P-CMGP uses small groups to ensure that the needs of the individual parents or the group as a whole are met. The climate of the program is meant to be accepting, supportive, and confidence-building. The program is often delivered at public libraries. The mother-centric bias implicit in the name of the program has stimulated the development of a similar language-oriented program intended to attract father's involvement: 'Man in the Moon.' In comparison, Indigenous spiritual frameworks generally refer to the moon as a feminine creative force.

Yaqui Family Literacy Partnership Program and Project Kaateme

Two programs in the U.S. exemplify community-driven, collaborative efforts to create a family milieu literacy program that have potential for Indigenous communities in Canada (Trujillo, 1997). Partnerships united the Pascua Yaqui Tribe Education Department, a community college, and the public school district. The □programs equally emphasized two generations and two goals: early literacy support for youngsters and literacy instruction for adults and out-of-school older siblings. A series of weekly classes delivered in tribal education facilities and built around culturally relevant themes engaged youth and parents in discussion of cultural themes, comparisons of Yaqui and European scientific perspectives and lifeways, critical reading of newspapers, oral and written reports, group discussions, and language-based work skills. A

highly acclaimed conference (“The First International Yaqui Language and Family Literacy Conference”) drew attention to the program and the opportunity it provided for the Indigenous community members to identify and articulate in their own terms the meaning and significance of literacy.

Bridging the Gap: Parent-child shared-book reading

In Australia, the Bridging the Gap program (Freeman & Bochner, 2008) illustrates the potential a shared-book reading approach. Aboriginal Education Assistants selected 10 books that would appeal to Indigenous children and parents, helped to games, and created a Tutor Book to guide their bi-weekly home visits. Parents and their 6 year old children were given a story box to store materials for the project, which they were encouraged to decorate. Books, materials for games, drawing, and writing were provided. Responding to some parents’ concern that reading the story books would be too difficult for them, parents were given audio-taped recordings of the books being read by Aboriginal Education Assistants. Book reading strategies that home visitor’s role modeled and taught included: encouraging an interest in books, print, and the alphabet; activating prior knowledge before story reading; listening to the story and asking questions during story reading; vocabulary extension; reviewing and re-telling the story and applying it to their own experiences. Parents’ questions and suggestions were discussed. At the end of seven months parents received a report on changes made by their child between pre- and post-test. Children’s mean reading age was higher than their mean chronological age, and there were increases in listening comprehension, phonemic awareness, and receptive language, as well as their self-esteem, interest in books, experiences with books at home, and home-school links. The project also had a positive impact on the role of the Aboriginal Education Assistants within the Indigenous Education Unit and their support of the literacy needs of Indigenous children in the first year at school.

II. Centre-based preschool programs

Story Thinking Programme

This Canadian program adapted a research-based, developmentally-based storytelling program (McKeough, Case et al., 1995) to reflect cultural realities of the Stoney/Nakoda people. The ultimate goal of the project is to influence practice and policy in early literacy classrooms devoted to Indigenous children so that relevant, essential support and resources are secured. The program focuses on story plot, problem solving, and characters’ intentions. Graphic depictions are used to support the construction of more advanced story concepts. Children are helped to create cohesive stories through the use of conjunctive words that signify additive, temporal, causal, and adversative relations between story events, first in a group storytelling setting and then with individual children. Instruction is multimodal, involving graphic, oral, and written modalities, which has been shown in previous research to maximize learning (Shafir, 1999). A First Nations advisory group was formed to guide the program adaptation, including three Elders, a school cultural coordinator, a school-based literacy coordinator, classroom teachers, and school principals. The advisory group identified literacy learning needs of local children, legends of the Stoney/Nakota people that could be incorporated into the program, content themes and instructional materials that were culturally relevant. Two of the researchers, one of whom was Indigenous, then developed sample lessons that the Advisory Committee reviewed. All instruction materials remained the property of the First Nation involved in the project. Preliminary results are encouraging.

Moe the Mouse

The B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society (2006) offers a speech and language theme box, called 'Moe the Mouse,' that includes some reading and writing. Activities and Indigenous toys and stories guide parents and educators to provide planned opportunities for children aged 3 to 4 years old to practice language skills in child care, preschool, and home settings. A workshop is also offered entitled "Making the Most of Moe" that demonstrates how to use the theme box in early childhood programs and explains how the activities in the theme box relate to children's speech and language, social skills, and early literacy development. This program is extremely popular in Indigenous early childhood programs and communities in B.C.

Aboriginal Head Start (AHS)

The federally funded AHS program generally involves Indigenous children aged 3 to 5 years. AHS in Canada is similar to the Head Start approach pioneered in the United States (Zigler & Valentine, 1979) insofar as the program integrates provisions for children's health, nutrition, education, and family development. By comparison, whereas the U.S. program uses a prescribed early learning curriculum with standardized tools for measuring and reporting on children's early learning; the Canadian program uses a holistic approach designed to evoke children's eagerness for learning and cultural pride, as well as parent support and involvement. The programs focus on culturally fitting, community-specific elaborations of six mandated program components: (1) culture and language; (2) education and school readiness; (3) health promotion; (4) nutrition; (5) social support; and (6) parent/family involvement. No standard early learning curriculum for children or training curriculum for staff is required or commonly used across programs. Local control of AHS programs allows for innovation to find the best curricula and staff for each community and child. As well, national and regional workshops and conferences have provided an array of opportunities to AHS staff to consider different kinds of learning objectives, approaches, curricula, and materials that might suit the objectives, needs, and interests of children and families involved in their particular program. The Creative Curriculum package (discussed subsequently) appears to be popular in many areas. AHS programs often involve community members in creating culturally informed learning resources such as stories, songs, books, arts and crafts, science projects, and activities. While most programs use English or French, children receive at least rudimentary exposure to the local Indigenous language.

Research on AHS by the Public Health Agency of Canada (2007) and the Western Arctic AHS Council (2007) indicate that at least one-quarter of the children enrolled in AHS have developmental delays or specific learning difficulties such as FASD and language-related disorders. Detailed findings of a national impact evaluation of AHS programs delivered in urban and northern communities have not been released. However a brief overview of findings obtained using the Work Sampling System indicates that children in 10 participating program sites had low baseline scores on language and literacy when they started the program and showed "moderate proficiency" in these areas after one year (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2007). Children showed greatest proficiency in physical development and health. Parents reported increases in their children's practice of their Indigenous cultural traditions and in Indigenous language acquisition. Evaluation of AHS sites in the Northwest Territories from 1996 to 2006 concluded that many children came to the program with developmental delays in language and social skills, and most children showed some improvement after one year in AHS (Western

Arctic AHS Council, 2007). The most positive findings came from parent and community ratings of the program's culture and language components. Another perspective on the impact of AHS comes from the Regional Health Survey conducted by the First Nations Centre (2005). The findings, based on reports by children's primary caregivers, indicate that AHS helped children to become ready for school as measured by reduced risk of repeating a grade: 11.6% of AHS attendees repeated a grade, compared to 18.7% of non-attendees who repeated a grade. Although there is a lack of detailed knowledge of what practitioners do to support emergent literacy in AHS programs or to what effect, these findings are encouraging.

The AHS model has a number of positive and promising features that are highly congruent with principles advocated by many Indigenous organizations, and it is extremely well received by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit parents and communities. Anecdotally, it has been seen how many AHS programs have become community hubs where additional programs are integrated or co-located to streamline children's access to specialists, including speech-language pathologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, dental hygienists, and other services. There is potential for AHS to serve as an entry point to add on early literacy programs through parent education and support, or early intervention programs for children identified by AHS staff or parents as needing extra supports. Alternatively or additionally, AHS would seem to be an accessible program where the education component of the program could be enhanced by introducing explicit, planned literacy activities throughout the curriculum. AHS staff training to increase their skill in planning and delivering early literacy activities would seem to hold significant potential.

Sound Foundations Program

Sound Foundations Program (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsely, 1991a,b) was used effectively by Whitehurst et al. (1994) to increase the emergent literacy skills of children in the Head Start program in the United States.

At Yatx'ł Satu Kei Nas.a'x Curriculum

The Yatx'ł Satu Kei Nas.a'x Curriculum was developed by the Central Council Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (CCTHITA) Head Start program in the U.S. The curriculum, embedded in tribal values and learning goals, is structured around the over-arching theme of 'seasons' and subsistence life style. The Tlingit economic year of hunting, salmon fishing, seaweed gathering, and berry picking are central elements. Activities involve four seasonal 'Gathering Places' with thematic units within each. For example, the Gathering Place for fall is Salmon Ecology. There are several choices for lessons and activities associated with each learning domain, including literacy. All of the lessons reinforce community values of taking care of natural resources, and all include Tlingit words and phrases. A family-based curriculum, called 'Family Feathers,' is tied to what children are learning so that parents and grandparents can further children's learning. This includes videos to help parents and grandparents learn about child development and it is tied to a "Family Time Workbook" (CCTHITA, 2002).

Language promotion strategies identified by CCTHITA and the English Language Learners Focus Group (U.S. Head Start Bureau, 2002) and by CCTHITA (2002) include:

- Learning environments are enhanced with the spoken and, when possible, the written language of the children. Efforts are made to extend the children's home language proficiency.
- Staff receive education and training in language-in-education methods, such as immersion programs and total physical response methods.
- Community Elders and language masters are included among the staff either through paid or volunteer positions. They are trained in language acquisition skills and have a defined role in language teaching.
- Resources are provided for a learning environment rich in culturally relevant and authentic literature, art, music, and studies that are congruent with community activities and values.
- Early literacy skills, including alphabet knowledge and phonemic awareness, are foci in learning activities and are provided using developmentally and culturally appropriate methods.
- Staff establish meaningful relationships with the community and thereby have firsthand experience in the lives of the people they serve.
- Staff work with families to conduct a language and literacy learning inventory (surveys, not assessments) to inform planning the overall program and how to meet the needs of individual children, as well as to encourage family involvement at home and in the centre-based program.
- Family and community stories are documented and shared and appropriately used as learning tools in the program.
- Parents are invited into the programs and for special sessions to help them learn how to extend learning to home environments.
- Parents are provided with resources on loan for early literacy and enhanced family literacy (e.g., kits, books, bags, audio-tapes).
- A summer curriculum development institute brings together parents, practitioners, and local artists, language specialists, and crafts people to create curriculum materials, including books, audiotapes, games, lesson plans, felt board stories, computer program software, and family take-home kits. These materials are reproduced so that resources reach across groups of children and across households.

Literacy Nest

Dunn (1999) describes the establishment of a Literacy Nest by the Djannara People of New South Wales in Australia. Drawing on ideas for culturally appropriate Language Nests in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the program uses individual and small group story reading programs for infants and preschoolers, and staff, including Indigenous staff, are trained in assisting literacy development.

III. School-based programs

Canadian case study of ten promising school-based approaches

From 2003 to 2004, Bell (2004) and a research team examined ten schools in Western Canada that appeared to be producing tangible gains for Indigenous students. Subsequently, Fulford (2007) examined ten schools in Quebec, Ontario, and Nunavut. These studies offer clues to language and literacy promotion strategies across the early years of formal schooling. Many of these schools had preschools or Kindergarten programs, but the research did not identify which programs were available to the youngest children or which program elements could account for gains in children's literacy learning.

The schools took a holistic approach to students' development and used the whole school environment in ways that, in varying combinations, appeared to work well to secure students' and parents' participation and students' overall success. Language and cultural programs were seen as making the greatest contribution to students' success. Several schools targeted language development programming ranging from Indigenous language immersion programs from Kindergarten to Grade 4 (e.g., Ahkwesahsne Mohawk Board of Education), to vocabulary building exercises using Total Physical Response (e.g., Chalo School), to parent involvement in daily vocabulary review with their children at home (e.g., Alert Bay).

Most of the schools targeted literacy development using a variety of approaches and literacy resources (see Raham, 2004). Commercially available reading programs were used by many schools, including: SRA, Nelson Benchmarks, Mastery Reading, Corrective Reading, Star Reading, Accelerated Reading; Reading Recovery, Reading 2000, and Scholastic. Several schools emphasized vocabulary learning to overcome English language deficits, such as poor comprehension. One school used instructional strategies tailored to a visual learning style, which was believed to be the learning style of Indigenous students. Some schools compressed or integrated the entire academic curriculum into the reading and writing programs. Four schools involved students in focused reading groups. A common factor was much lower teacher/student ratios (ranging from 1/11 to 1/18) compared to most public schools. Some schools used teaching assistants, student teachers, and other personnel to achieve a low pupil/teacher ratio. Teachers created supportive and comfortable learning environments. They were willing to adapt and experiment to find optimal methods for each student and tutored, coached, and encouraged students. They incorporated the local culture into the curriculum and maintained open communication with parents.

All schools had established programs for children at risk, including priority placement in early childhood programs (nursery, Aboriginal Head Start, preschool, full-day Kindergarten) and programs to support the development of phonemic awareness, sometimes involving one-to-one

coaching. All 20 schools made extraordinary efforts to involve parents in supporting home reading, and they used community workers to assist families.

At all of the schools, there were increasing numbers of students who were assessed as “ready to read” when they started first grade. The gains shown in these case studies may be replicable in other preschools, Kindergartens and schools.

Kalelemuku (“Stay the course”)

Kalelemuku was a successful school-wide initiative aimed at improving Indigenous Hawaiian students’ success (Arnold, Kishi, & Sing, 2004; Choi, Yamashiro, et al., 2004). Culturally responsive teaching and learning in this initiative drew upon the work of Chun (2004) on traditional Hawaiian ways of teaching and learning, and the concepts of Brentro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) on reclaiming youth at risk, centred around the values of membership, mastery, independence, and generosity. The reading program, which was strongly emphasized, included:

- (1) Goals, objectives and priorities: Reading was given a priority, presence of a coherent reading plan, resources, and practices that support reading instruction.
- (2) Assessment: The reading levels of each student were identified, useful data was generated to inform instruction, progress was monitored frequently, and reports were available in useful formats for teachers.
- (3) Instructional programs and materials: the program employed research-based core reading programs and supplemental materials and instruction.
- (4) Instruction, grouping and scheduling: Flexible, homogeneous groupings of students were formed, with special support for struggling readers, and instruction adjusted to learner performance.
- (5) Administration, organization, and communication: These elements included having a plan for sharing student reading performance, having a school-wide reading action plan, and having special education programs that complemented reading instruction in the general education program.
- (6) Professional development: The staff received sufficient training as well as time allocated to refine reading instruction.
- (7) Kindergarten students, including those identified as being ‘at risk’, showed remarkable improvement between the beginning and end of the Kindergarten year on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy (DIBELS) (Good & Kaminski, 2002), measuring letter naming, initial sounds, and phonemic segmentation fluency. In Grade 1, scores on nonsense word fluency were better and students in Grades 1 through 5 showed significant gains in oral reading fluency.

Learning Connections

Emergent literacy programs that could be helpful in the Canadian context have been studied in the U.S. state of Hawaii, where 20% of the population is Indigenous. DeBaryshe and Gorecki (2005) report an effective, research-based program called Learning Connections (LC), which was an “add on” program for preschoolers identified as being “at risk”, providing an enriched focus on emergent literacy and numeracy as an adjunct to more comprehensive ECCE programs. (In an earlier article, DeBaryshe and Gorecki (2003) describe the use of this program specifically with Native Hawaiian preschoolers.) LC emphasized four main content areas for

literacy instruction: oral language; phonemic awareness; alphabet and print conventions; and emergent writing.

Small group, individualized instruction. Careful sequencing of learning activities to promote successful learning was based on both social learning theory and Montessori teaching methods. Teachers followed a daily lesson plan for an introductory circle time and two or three literacy activities done during learning center rotations. Each activity was conducted with small groups of one to four children, depending on the needs and skills of the children. Teachers were encouraged to keep the composition of learning groups consistent. Literacy curriculum materials were made available to children as free-choice activities as well as in the learning center rotations.

Cultural relevance. Curriculum content (e.g., concepts, vocabulary, materials) used many examples of local culture (e.g., both widely available rhyming books, and Hawai'ian Creole English versions of classic nursery rhymes, local flora and fauna, familiar family events and clothing).

Family involvement. A family curriculum aimed to increase the frequency and quality of parent-child learning interactions. It consisted of 24 weekly home activities that paralleled the lessons children received at school. Parents were given simple written descriptions of the activity and any needed materials. Most activities yielded a product (e.g., a home-made book, a collection of objects obtained on a scavenger hunt) that parents place in their child's classroom portfolio. Parents were also encouraged to borrow books on a weekly basis and to complete ratings and comments on each week's activities. A mentor met informally with parents individually or in small groups as they dropped off their children.

Ongoing teacher mentoring. Teacher mentoring and ongoing technical assistance were integral to the curriculum package. A master's level teacher met two full mornings per month in each classroom. Ongoing curriculum training sessions were held every month. The small group nature of the ongoing training allowed for interaction, practice, and reflective conversation.

Learning Connections: An effective enrichment program

Significant positive effects of the Learning Connections program were found for three of literacy outcomes: emergent reading, phonemic awareness, and letter-sound correspondence. These gains were significantly greater than for children provided with a program using the Creative Curriculum only. Literacy gains were greatest for English language learners, children with high attendance rates, and children whose families increased their level of home stimulation. DeBaryshe and Gorecki (2005) attributed significant literacy gains of LC compared to the Creative Curriculum alone to:

- literacy learning activities that were more frequent and specific;
- lesson plans that were carefully sequenced and supported by clear instructions, mentoring and support for teachers;
- classroom stability, including using the same groupings of children and having the same teacher over time; and
- an intensive parent curriculum and parent support.

These are dimensions of emergent literacy strategies that are found across many of the programs that have shown promise and could be explored in the Canadian context.

Early intervention for children needing extra supports

For a variety of reasons, some children do not respond as well as other children to general program strategies designed to promote emergent literacy skills. Research shows that children with a range of developmental difficulties and circumstances that adversely affect emergent literacy skills benefit most from participating in highly structured, small group, and individualized activities designed deliberately to promote emergent literacy in key areas (see Fey, Catts, & Larrivee, 1995; Layton, Deeny, Upton, & Tall, 1998; Lundberg, Frost, & Petersen, 1988; Majsterek, Shorr, & Erion, 2000; O'Connor, Jenkins, Leicester, & Slocum, 1993; van Kleeck, Gillam, & McFadden, 1998). While these children can benefit from literature-based activities in which literacy goals are implicitly addressed, they are more likely to show widespread, significant gains from additional, explicit, structured tasks targeting key literacy skills. At the same time, it should be noted, especially for evaluation of early interventions, that oral language skills and literacy orientation assessed before an early intervention are likely to predict emergent literacy performance at the end of an intervention (Justice et al., 1999). Early literacy intervention is not a panacea and should be offered in the context of other supports for child health, development, and early learning.

Screening and assessment of children at an early stage in their language and literacy development enables early intervention for children needing extra supports. In this regard, it is important to note that the terms 'at risk,' 'special needs,' 'targeted,' and 'surveillance' can be sensitive for some Indigenous families and communities, potentially connoting that some children are not as treasured as others, or evoking concerns about unwanted government intrusion into child-rearing and family life. Awareness of the devastating history and ongoing concerns about interventions by governments and institutions into Indigenous lives is foundational for good practice with young children and families, and it is essential to be sensitive about the ways that general and specific supports are presented to families and to the children themselves.

Early identification depends upon culturally appropriate assessment strategies as well as practitioners who are able to establish and draw upon positive relationships with children's caregivers. Since there are no formal assessment tools that have been developed specifically for populations of Indigenous children, early identification must rest largely upon the practitioner's ingenuity, adaptation of existing tools, and information gathering from adult caregivers and other practitioners who may be involved with a child (e.g., speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, etc.).

Emergent literacy interventions for young children who are identified as being 'at risk' of poor literacy outcomes are generally framed within the theoretical perspective that emergent literacy knowledge is best acquired through frequent, informal, naturalistic, and meaningful interactions with literacy-related artefacts (e.g., books, writing, instruments) (Watkins & Bunce, 1996; Watson, Layton et al., 1994). School-based interventions can be more limited in scope and impact compared to the play-based, family-involving approaches characteristic of ECCE programs. "Time is of the essence" is a principle to bear in mind in introducing targeted early

intervention programs for children with needs for special supports. Emergent literacy skills are implicated in many of the task demands from the earliest months of formal schooling, and experiences of difficulty in the transition to school can be a powerful disincentive to attendance and/or engagement in learning. Further, literacy problems are more resistant to remediation as children grow older (Juel, 1988; Stanovich, 1986).

Early intervention programs for literacy usually involve a specific, developmentally derived curriculum in which children participate in a set series of structured tasks for a certain amount of time each day or week. Structured tasks are designed to directly target emergent literacy skills. Activities are designed to promote children's attention to the orthographic features of written language and the phonologic features of oral language, typically including letter naming and phonological awareness games. Activities can be designed to target those areas in which children have particular difficulties or areas that are most highly associated with later literacy outcomes (see Lundberg, Frost et al., 1988). Activities that yielded positive outcomes in early intervention studies involving non-Indigenous children are, in fact, many of the same activities reviewed earlier for general program strategies. Those activities that will address the emergent literacy needs and preferences of individual children are offered more frequently, often both through the home and centre-based programs, and children's progress is monitored so that increasingly challenging feedback and new activities can be introduced as the child is ready. For some children, involvement of a speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, audiologist, nutritionist, dentist, optometrist, psychologist, or other specialists may be needed in order to address underlying or contributory physiological issues.

First Steps

In contrast to early intervention approaches that pull children out and often involve remedial or learning support teachers, First Steps is an enrichment program delivered in some of the schools in Western Australia that have a high proportion of Indigenous students, referred to as English Language and Numeracy (ELAN) schools (Deschamp, 1995). While some of the students are seen as being 'at risk,' all of the students receive the program, thereby avoiding the often self-fulfilling, stigmatizing effects of remedial pull out approaches. The program includes a variety of strategies for enhancing literacy and numeracy activities in classes, as well as a general pedagogical approach that involves direct instruction in large groups, small group work, and tailoring individual children's work to their own level, teacher modelling of skills, and teaching children to recognize different strategies they can use to approach a literacy or numeracy task.

Case studies of ELAN schools with First Steps have shown that children are happier, more engaged in learning, and have higher self-esteem than children in ELAN schools without First Steps (Deschamp, 1995). Teachers attribute these outcomes in part to the "Have a go" approach used in the program, which creates safety for children to risk learning without fear of failure. Children are more willing to experiment with language and teachers are more conscious of working with language, so they experiment more as well. Program success is also attributed to the individualized approach used within the "whole class" setting, such that children who are struggling can be assisted without it being obvious that they are doing different work from the rest of their class. Also, the First Steps initiative provides ELAN schools with a higher staffing allocation, additional training for ELAN teachers, and more resources than typical schools. Extra staffing means that teachers can offer homework classes, meet with parents, run parent

workshops, and help to implement health and nutrition programs. , A learning point for the Canadian context is that extra resources may very well be needed in order to implement an early literacy program in a “whole class” context with a high proportion of “at risk” children in a way that practitioners find feasible, that involves parents, and that fully supports the learning needs of individual children.

Education and mentoring for practitioners

The success of any ECCE curriculum depends on the practitioners who implement it. Early childhood educators need to design different types of programs to meet the specific, individual needs of young Indigenous children (Freebody, 2000). They need to be supported to: learn different kinds of pedagogies for promoting oral language and literacy; value their own knowledge and skill in noticing what a child can do in terms of speaking, listening, reading, and writing; work with and from those literacy practices, interests and experiences that children have developed; and design different learning pathways accordingly.

Effective training for ECE's

Summarizing the literature, DeBaryshe and Gorecki (2005) conclude that training for early childhood practitioners to be most effective in promoting emergent literacy is most effective when:

- (1) the training provided is specifically designed for the curriculum to be implemented;
- (2) teachers are given ample opportunity for hands-on practice;
- (3) on-site observation and feedback are provided by a supportive mentor over an extended period of time;
- (4) teachers are encouraged to reflect on and evaluate their new practices; and
- (5) the content of training and supervision activities are matched with each teacher's developmental level (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Malone, Straka, & Logan, 2000; Spodek, 1996).

In addition to developing skill in supporting emergent literacy, an important focus for pre-service and in-service training is to help practitioners to develop cultural competence. learn to build relationships, provide cultural safety for Indigenous families, and support linguistically diverse young children and their families (Ball, 2005; Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003). Also, Rinehart (2005) notes that because staff may be from the community where a program is delivered does not necessarily mean they are able to create a caring environment for young children to explore and develop. Important training components include:

- Learning about the historical contexts and cultures of children and families to be served;
- Learning about one's own beliefs, values, strengths, and needs for learning and support;
- Learning to work across disciplines and with practitioners in other programs in the community;

- Learning about language acquisition, including bilingual learning, and about ways to support emergent literacy in culturally and linguistically diverse young Indigenous children.

There is also broad agreement that infant and early learning and child care and development practitioners need to be skilled in working with parents and children to facilitate language and literacy skills and to detect difficulties as early as possible (Ball, 2005a). Investments in strengthening the capacity of these front-line workers could be the most effective approach to promoting Indigenous children's language and emerging literacy.

Conclusion

Just as poverty is expensive, so too are the costs of poor early literacy in terms of risks to long-term educational outcomes and life opportunities. Literacy skills increase the probability of school success, opportunities for employment, economic security, and enjoyment in life (Bird & Akerman, 2005). Persisting educational inequities among Indigenous children indicate a need for intensified, thoughtful efforts to ensure that children receive culturally meaningful supports for their emergent literacy, starting with collaborations with parents and other caregivers in family as well as community settings.

The foregoing review supplements earlier reports generated by CLLRNet on young Indigenous children's language and literacy development, providing an enhanced focus on emergent literacy and an expanded look at initiatives with Indigenous children in Canada and in other countries. There is a paucity of reports about promising programs to promote emergent literacy among young Indigenous children, and even fewer reports of research evaluating literacy program effectiveness. Exceptions include programs highlighted in the foregoing review, which can be seen as promising practices to inspire adaptations and innovations in collaboration with Indigenous families and communities.

Key elements of an emergent literacy strategy

Literature reviewed for this report lends support for the following seven key elements of a comprehensive strategy to improve literacy development among young Indigenous children:

- (1) Increase provisions for young Indigenous children to have access and to regularly attend quality early learning programs, including home-based, centre-based, and community-based drop-in programs.
- (2) Increase specialist services to ensure early identification and treatment for hearing, dental, and other health problems that undermine language development and emergent literacy for many young Indigenous children.
- (3) Provide early years practitioners and specialists involved in speech and language, dental, vision, and hearing services, with professional development opportunities to sharpen their insights into how their own culturally-based understandings of early learning and literacies shape their practice, and to enhance their skills in culturally competent collaborations with parents, other caregivers, and other practitioners, to ensure culturally appropriate program designs and cultural safety for Indigenous children and families.
- (4) Provide early years practitioners with training and resources to assess family literacy practices and to design group, parent-child, and individualized early literacy programs and

early intervention program components for children identified as needing extra supports to develop literacy skills.

- (5) Create books and other print materials, as well as audio-taped story-telling and computer-based literacy materials, through collaboration with Indigenous community members, that:
 - (a) present Indigenous children and families positively and accurately;
 - (b) represent activities and surroundings that are familiar to many young Indigenous children; and
 - (c) reflect the home and community experiences of specific populations of young Inuit, Métis, and First Nations children.
- (6) Involve early childhood services and schools in working together to develop continuity for Indigenous children's literacy development during the critical transition from home to school, focusing especially on enhanced readiness of schools to support these children's holistic development and culturally meaningful learning.
- (7) Institute a collaborative program of research involving Indigenous families, early years practitioners, and researchers to document, evaluate, and share promising practices, solve problems of access, attendance, program implementation and efficacy, and improve outcomes of emergent literacy support initiatives.

Guiding principles

These elements must be delivered within a general framework which recognizes that:

- (1) there is tremendous diversity between and within populations of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis young children and families in Canada and no one approach will be culturally meaningful or effective for all of them;
- (2) young Indigenous children's primary caregivers, including mothers, fathers, grandparents and other carers, are the primary resources for promoting children's language and literacy development, especially in the early years from birth and throughout primary school; and
- (3) any efforts to promote young Indigenous children's health, development, early learning, and eventual success in school and in life requires political will. Structural reforms must improve the quality of life for Indigenous families. Actions must be taken to mitigate the inter-generational effects of the Indian Residential School experience as well as the ongoing disruption of culturally-based lifestyles among some Indigenous populations due to climate change, natural resource depletion, urban migration, and the hyper-assimilationist pressures of globalization.

These components are similar to those prioritized in the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy advanced by the Australian Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (2000).

Improving developmental outcomes for Indigenous children should be a priority of the federal government. This goal will require a large-scale and sustained effort on many fronts. In contrast to "quick fix" innovations rolled out and back with the turning of political tides, for over a decade AHS has established credibility in Aboriginal communities, built a cadre of trained and experienced program staff, accumulated a wealth of anecdotal reports and program examples, and taken some initial steps toward documenting outcomes for children. AHS could be an important portal for delivering holistic emergent literacy programs as well as enrichment programs specifically for children who are struggling with oral language or overall development.

Providing equitable resources and supports for Indigenous children to maximize their full potential for literacy in the Standard English or Standard French language of schooling, commerce, and politics in Canada is one important component of a comprehensive strategy.

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In Australia, the XYZ National SIEP Review (DATE)

A small selection of children's books for early childhood literacy by Indigenous authors and/or illustrators:

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