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Syllabus**

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**CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES FOR FACILITATING EARLY  
LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN\***

**Introduction**

This presentation reports initial findings of a survey which is the first in a series of studies to enhance understandings about language development and socialization of Indigenous children in Canada and how best to support optimal language development outcomes. The survey reported here elicited reports from certified speech language pathologists across Canada with practice experience with Indigenous children. A concurrent study, to be reported at a later date, involves interviewing First Nations parents and Elders about their perceptions and preferences regarding their young children's language development.

**Background**

In research involving predominantly European-heritage, urban-based populations of children, the importance of language development for supporting intellectual and social development in the preschool years has been well established (Johnston, British Columbia Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors, 1996). Studies have shown that European-heritage children in North America use language to improve memory (Myers & Permuter, 1978), guide perception (Stiles-Davis, Tada, & Whipple, 1990), build number concepts (Saxe, 1979), solve problems (Kohlberg, Yaeger, & Hjertholm, 1968), discover social categories (Rice & Kemper, 1984), and gain access to cultural values (Heath, 1983; Blank, Rose, & Berlin, 1978). In mainstream research, language proficiency in childhood is the best predictor of future cognition (Capute, 1987). As well, most researchers today view reading and writing, including spelling, as applications of language skills that rely on an oral language basis (Brady & Shankweiler, 1991; Catts & Kamhi, 1999; Gerber, 1993; Golsworthy, 1996; Kavanaugh & Mattingly, 1972; Paul, 2001; Snowling & Stackhouse, 1996; Velutino, 1977).

Current strategies for assessing and promoting language facilitation by caregivers, including parents, early childhood educators, and speech-language therapists have drawn largely on social interactionist accounts of how children learn language from adult language input. These accounts have been based largely on research with white

middle-class cultural groups in metropolitan areas. In different cultures, different communication skills are considered important, different approaches to their teaching are valued, and different situations and people are available for their teaching (Crago, 1992; Schiffelin 1990; Schiffelin and Ochs 1986). Options need to be considered for adjusting language facilitation and intervention strategies to match cultural values, language socialization practices, developmental goals for children, and priorities (Ball, 2002; Girolometto et al., 1999; Johnston, 2002; van Kleeck, 1994).

Indigenous leaders in Canada have argued that lack of services, as well as culturally inappropriate education, specialist services and screening procedures, result in serious negative consequences for Indigenous children, including over- and under-recognition of children with developmental challenges, undermining cultural-driven goals for development, and failing to support developmental steps in Indigenous language learning. Current research has emphasized the recognition of cultural context as a foundation for meaningful assessment and service delivery, as well as the definition of 'quality' and methods to evaluate effectiveness through a socially inclusive, collaborative process that incorporates cherished aspects of Indigenous cultures, languages, traditions, and goals for children (Ball, 2002).

### **Program of Research**

Three studies are concurrently underway as part of the and the Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships ([www.ecdip.org](http://www.ecdip.org)) at the University of Victoria's School of Child and Youth Care, and under the auspices of the Human Early Learning Partnership among the four universities in B.C. ([www.earlylearning.ubc.ca](http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca)).

1. First is a survey of speech-language pathologists (SLPs) across Canada who self-identified as having experience with providing services for First Nations and/or Inuit children.
2. Second is an interview-based study of First Nations parents' and Elders' understandings, goals, and activities regarding the language development of young First Nations children.
3. Third is an exploration of Aboriginal English dialect and the implications of exposure to different English dialects and contextually varying expectations for language form, content and use for Aboriginal children's language development, assessment of language proficiency and school readiness, and intervention.

Together, this program of research is expected to yield a better understanding of Indigenous cultural values and the goals, priorities, strengths, challenges, approaches and appropriate tools to support Indigenous families' and communities' facilitation of their children's language development. This presentation focuses on (1) the survey capturing SLPs reflections on practice.

### **Speech-Language Pathologists' Perceptions of Services for Indigenous Children**

#### **Survey Development**

Two versions of a survey questionnaire (short: 45 items / long: 59 items) were developed to gather information on:

- demographics of SLPs and SLP services
- services provided to Indigenous children, families, and communities
- views on language development in Mother Tongue and English or French
- language development (content, form and use) of Indigenous children
- SLP's perceptions of needs for new tools and approaches.

The survey questions were designed to gather quantitative (frequencies, ratings, rankings) and qualitative (open-ended reports of practice) information on the topics listed. The questions were developed with input from several SLPs who have worked extensively with Indigenous children as well as one SLP who is currently studying cross-cultural practice, and one First Nations SLP.

### **Data Collection**

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

### **Respondents**

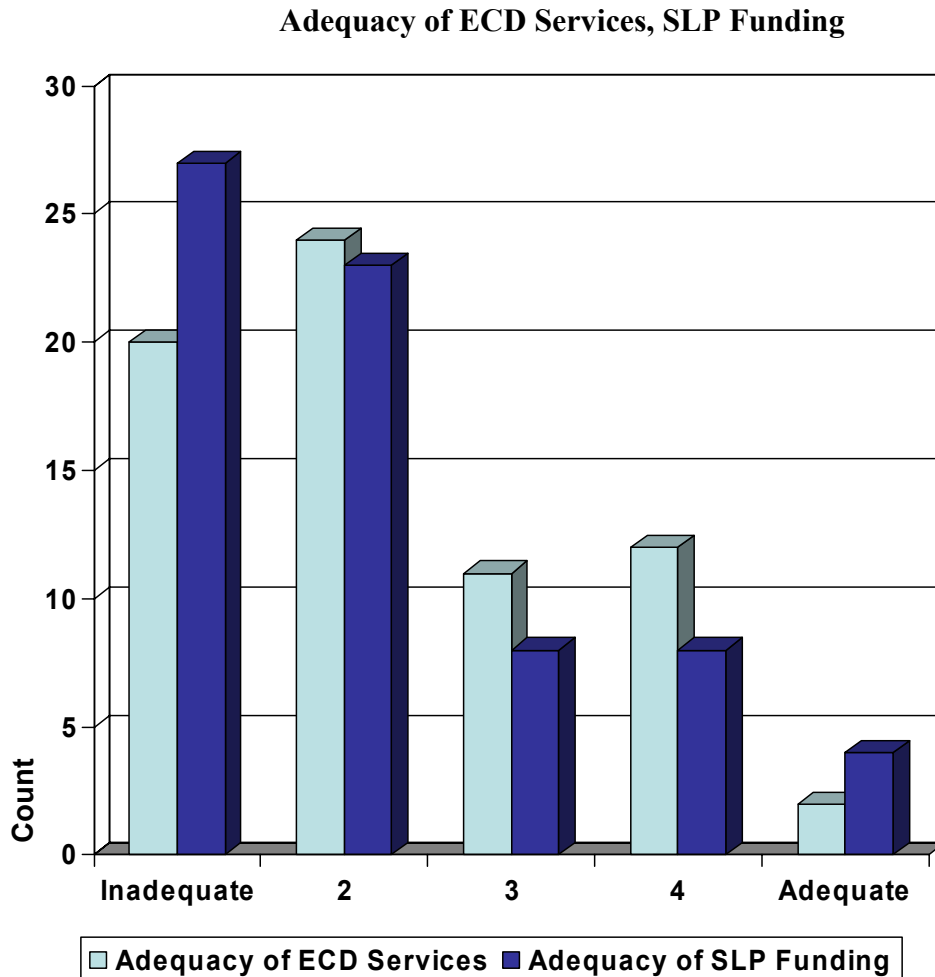
From August to October 2003, 70 completed surveys (27 long, 43 short) were obtained from registered SLPs across Canada who self-reported practice experience with Indigenous children. Two respondents were First Nations. An additional three respondents identified as members of visible minority groups. Although all provinces and territories were represented in the sample with the exception of Prince Edward Island, a majority (78%) of SLP respondents had worked with Indigenous children in the four western provinces. Two-thirds of respondents had gained their experience in an Indigenous school, agency or health centre. More than one-third (38%) of respondents reported spending 'All' or 'A lot' of their time working with Indigenous children; an additional 29% reported spending 'Some' of their time in the past two years working with Indigenous children. All respondents had some experience with Indigenous children under nine years of age, and most (87%) had worked 'primarily' with Indigenous children 0-5 years.

### **Key Themes**

SLPs were prolific in their responses to open-ended questions and contributed a richly detailed, highly consistent characterization of Indigenous children's language behaviours and of Indigenous parents' language socialization practices. Respondents also generated a large number of practical recommendations for working alongside parents and communities. For brevity, key themes that have been constructed to represent results of analyses of quantitative and qualitative data will be presented here along with brief commentary. One caveat - reiterated by many respondents - is that there are many different Indigenous populations in Canada (605 registered First Nations and many Inuit communities) and Indigenous children vary in their level of exposure to and involvement with non-Indigenous social settings and institutions. Generalizations must be taken cautiously.

### 1. Inadequate funding and inappropriate services

Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that funding for Early Childhood Development services and for SLP services are ‘inadequate’ in the settings that they have observed.



Further, 79% of respondents stated that SLPs need ‘to take an altogether different approach when serving Indigenous communities.’ Over half of the respondents perceived that it is critical to develop new education and intervention strategies as well as new assessment tools specifically for Indigenous children.

### 2. Family and community driven programs and services

A high level of agreement was found among respondents regarding the importance of practitioners learning about the cultural beliefs, practices and way of being of the families and communities served, being aware of diversity within and between communities, and developing and providing programs and services that are family and community driven.

The prevailing view in the ethnographic literature is that parent-child interactions reflect cultural belief systems (Johnston, 2002). Chao (1996) argues that cultural belief systems pervasively influence child development through being embodied not just in observable behaviour but in the organization of the home and the ongoing history of the priorities and decisions of families. SLP respondents reflected this belief in the practices that they recommended as being useful.

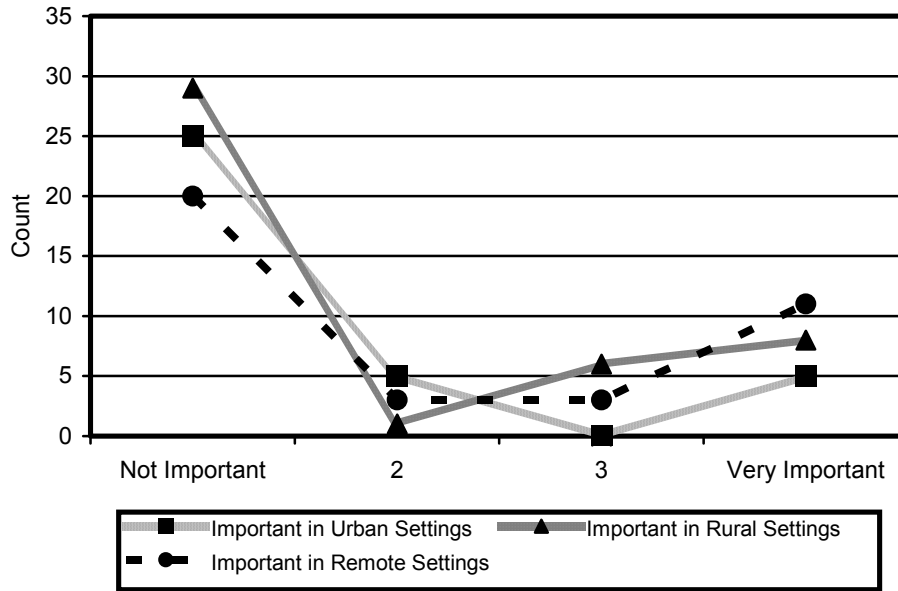
Taken together, descriptions by SLP respondents conveyed a clear impression that Indigenous children's experiences with language and the role of language are unique in many ways compared to non-Indigenous children. Most respondents emphasized that efforts to influence and shape children's language development need to be guided by the values and wishes of the families and communities in which the children live. Many SLPs warned that, unless one is very familiar with a particular Indigenous culture, it would be very difficult to develop appropriate assessment and intervention strategies and generally to interact with service recipients in respectful, relevant, useful ways without mentoring and guidance by family and other community members who could provide knowledge of cultural protocol, cultural values, culturally conditioned goals for children's development, the social organization of language and language socialization. This experience is reflected in various professional practice guidelines which guide SLPs to work in collaboration and with support of one or more people in the community who are proficient or nearly proficient in the Native language/dialect and who are from the same cultural background as the client to be able to provide effective and culturally appropriate services (CASLPA 2002, Speech Pathology Australia: Fact Sheet 2.4)

### **3. Cultural differences in the value of talk**

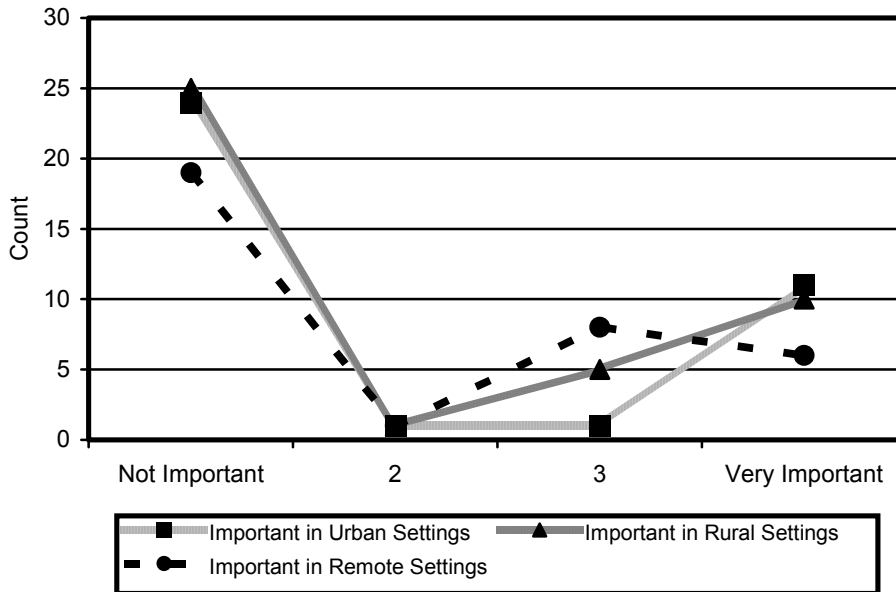
SLPs reported a large number of distinctive features of the social use of language by Indigenous children and families. SLPs' comments frequently pertained to their perceptions of the value of talk in Indigenous families. They perceived, for example, that in social interactions involving Indigenous children and adults, talk is reserved for important matters. A lot of talking, or 'talkativeness' on the parts of both children and adults is discouraged. Listening is highly valued.

A striking finding is that a significant number of SLPs perceived that children learning English, French, or their Mother Tongue is "not very important" to Indigenous parents. This perception was particularly strong among respondents who served children and families in rural and remote settings. This perception, if accurate, would have significant implications for early childhood care and development, schooling, specialized services, and for developmental outcomes. It is possible to take SLPs perceptions at face value as an observation rather than inference based on lack of understanding. However, it is possible that SLPs tend to infer a low value on language learning as an interpretation of the low value placed on pervasive or indiscriminate expressive language, or 'talkativeness' on the parts of young children, and the relatively low level of involvement of parents in eliciting language from their infants and toddlers.

**SLP Evaluation: “How important is it for Indigenous parents and other caregivers that their young children learn their Mother Tongue?”**



**SLP Evaluation: “How important is it for Indigenous parents and other caregivers that their young children learn English or French?”**



Other evidence about Indigenous people's language use suggests that talk is highly valued in particular contexts, by particular people, with particular intentions. In contrast, in social contexts involving European-heritage parents and children, vocalization and verbalization is strongly encouraged from birth through the preschool years. In European heritage families, spontaneous and readily forthcoming verbal behaviour on the parts of all family members may be so much the norm that it is difficult to ferret out content that is intended to have a dialogical impact on other participants. It becomes a kind of background noise. In contrast, in many Indigenous contexts, speech utterances are a more high contrast, low frequency event, intended, when it occurs, to influence or contribute to shared dialogue. Further, expressive language is only half of language, and many SLPs descriptions of Indigenous children's behaviour (e.g., quietly paying attention, listening followed by doing) suggest that receptive language development is valued and supported. The cultural goals, norms, and rules governing language learning and use in particular Indigenous communities requires further study in order to understand what is being observed and the implications for education, speech-language facilitation, and other services.

#### **4. Cultural differences in language socialization**

The low value of children's talk was seen by SLPs as related to language socialization practices. Children are encouraged to learn through listening and doing, more than by asking questions and verbally processing their experiences. SLP respondents perceived that Indigenous parents believe that children will talk when they are ready, that Indigenous parents hover less, and that Indigenous parents encourage children's self-directed play and peer group socialization more than language mediated adult-child interactions. The most recurrent description of Indigenous children's language behaviour was that they tend to be quiet and reflective - learning through listening, observing, doing and being included in family and community activities. Children were described as responding well to interactions involving doing things together, and to peer interaction. They are seen as tending not to ask question, reticent about answering questions, and unlikely to talk about themselves. They were characterized frequently by respondents as 'late talkers.'

SLPs characterizations are evocative of a distinction drawn by Heath (1989) between societies in which children are thought to 'grow up' and those in which children are 'raised' or 'brought up.' Heath found that parents who believe children must be 'raised' engage in a distinct set of verbalizations with their children, involving highly specific verbal communication about events, requests for children to recount step-by-step features of their own actions, and so forth. In contrast, parents who believe children 'grow up' tend to make fewer attempts at dialogue with their young child, and are less likely to prompt their child to recount events in order to practice verbal communication.

The findings noted above, as well as differences noted in the conversational style, such as initiating conversation, asking direct questions, eye contact and temporal aspects of interactions need to be taken into consideration in services to support all forms of learning by Indigenous children. Some SLPs reported observing that the content, goals and fast-paced atmosphere in mainstream preschool and school settings seem mismatched

with Indigenous children's experiences, understanding and expression. Educational difficulties faced by Aboriginal children in Australia have been linked to cultural and linguistic differences between the home and school (Walton 1993). Aboriginal English has been described as the main language of 80% of Aboriginal Australians (Speech Pathology Australia, Fact Sheet 2.4). It differs from European-heritage English in its pragmatics and discourse structure as well as in its phonology, syntax, and lexico-semantic system (Malcolm et al. 1999). Similar differences were reported by SLPs in this study.

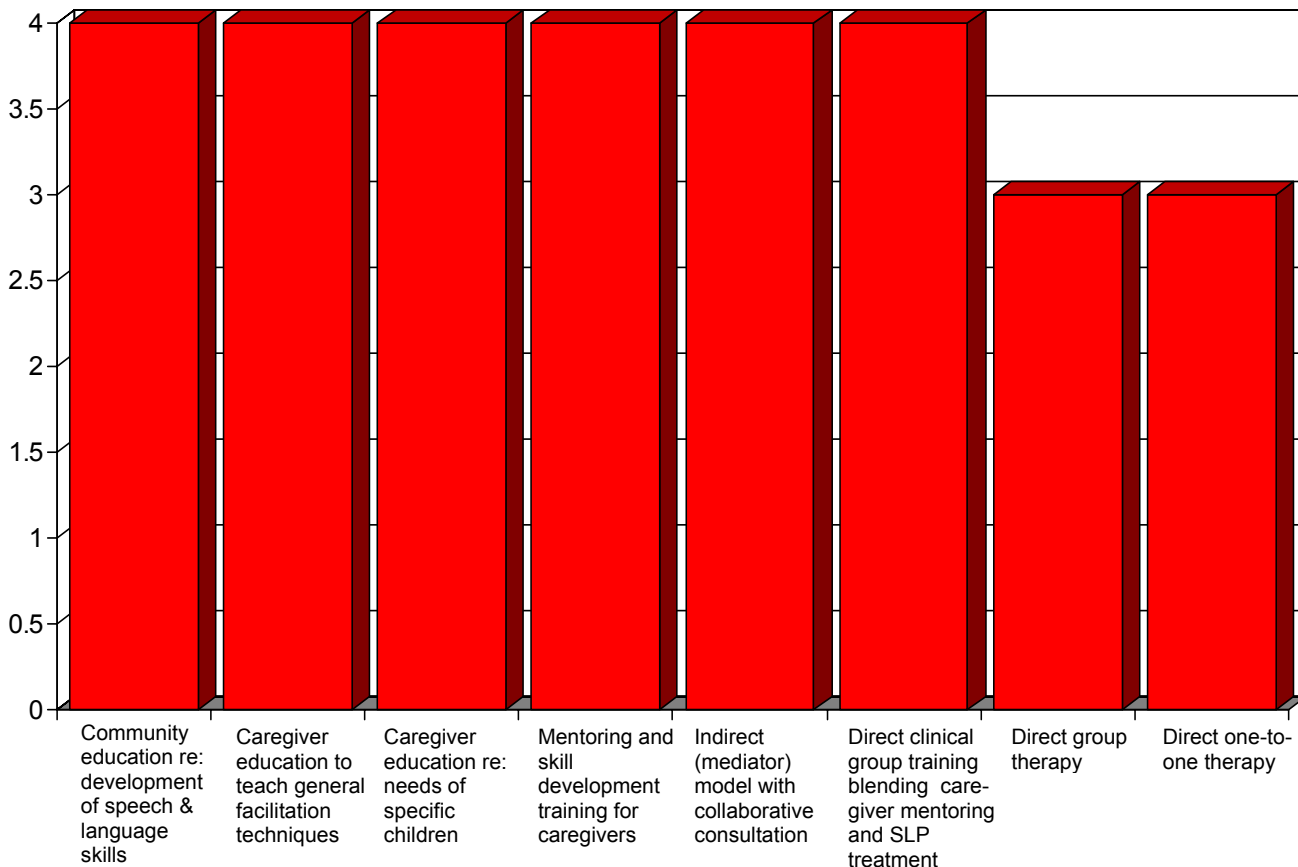
Understanding trends among Indigenous peoples with regards to the value of talk, the role of adults in language socialization, and the social organization of speech-mediated interactions sheds light on cultural bias in mainstream SLP practice, early childhood education, and in schooling. From this we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

#### **5. Population-based and capacity building approach favored over direct clinical services**

More than half of SLPs reported spending the majority of their time in Indigenous contexts providing services to children with communicative disorders and weak language. While SLPs endorsed ALL approaches to service delivery in Indigenous communities as 'most helpful', most respondents strongly recommended that services to Indigenous children involve more of a population-based, capacity building approach than is currently practiced. For assessment, most respondents selected the approach of 'repeat screening from birth to age 5' as 'most helpful' rather than concentrating on targeted screening or assessment of referred children. 'One time screening of all children' was seen as least helpful. For education and intervention approaches, respondents uniformly rated as 'most appropriate' services that ranged from population-based to targeted for individual children and involved education of the public as well as education and mentoring of caregivers. Direct group and individual therapy were rated as least suitable across all respondents.



## Recommended Educational/Intervention Approaches to Best Suit Cultural Values, Beliefs and Priorities of Indigenous Families



Median ratings on most appropriate educational/intervention approaches: 1 = least suited/ 5 = most suited

SLP respondents were usually engaged in providing services as a result of referral for individual children, reflecting perhaps a limited understanding on the parts of communities and agencies about the potential benefits of SLP consultation, mentoring, and ongoing developmental monitoring at a population-based level.

Many respondents expressed the view that because of their knowledge and skills in facilitating language development, social communication, pre-literacy and early literacy, they are well-suited as a profession to support Indigenous parents' goals and needs regarding their children's language development, including normatively developing children, children with delayed and disordered language, children learning their Mother Tongue language, children learning English as a second language and as a second dialect. Models that reflect a continuum of programs and services such as that recommended by SLP survey respondents have been developed (Warr-Leeper, 2001).

## 6. **Mother tongue**

Seventy per cent of respondents noted that, although Mother Tongue is typically not incorporated into their services, if they were given help from speakers of a child's Mother Tongue, they would be eager to incorporate it and support children learning their Mother Tongue. Many explained that parents should be encouraged to maintain their dominant language used at home. This is consistent with professional practice guidelines for SLPs working in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural context (CASLPA 2002, ASHA 2004). Especially in rural and remote areas, SLPs found that the dominant language is often the Mother Tongue. Some respondents cited the positive contributions that learning Mother Tongue can make to a child's sense of connection to community and to self-esteem.

## 7. **Importance of establishing positive and trusting relationships**

SLP respondents in the current study consistently pointed to the importance of establishing positive and trusting relationships with Indigenous caregivers of Indigenous children, and with people who are trusted within the Indigenous community to which the child belongs. This requires a consistent presence in the community, patience, time, flexibility, understanding and a desire to learn. Learning through listening and observing without asking a lot of questions are important interactive skills to utilize. Activities desired by the community that enhance the knowledge and skills of people who live and are trusted in the community builds capacity that can have longevity and broad application.

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