ABORIGINAL YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT: PROMISING PRACTICES AND NEEDS

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

Although improvements to the collection of population level data and early intervention research are sorely needed, reports from Aboriginal programs and organizations indicate the need for a comprehensive national strategy focusing on policies and programs that would help families and communities stimulate language development and access diagnostic and early intervention services for their young children when needed. This article highlights the foundational role of language in securing children's long-term academic, social and economic success, the importance of heritage language for cultural identity and belonging, and the contributions that a multi-level, multi-sectoral strategy could make in ensuring that Aboriginal children achieve optimal speech-language development outcomes.

Malgré le fait que le besoin d'améliorer la collecte de données auprès de la population et de faire de la recherche sur l'intervention précoce se fait fortement sentir, les rapports des programmes et des organisations autochtones indiquent le besoin d'une stratégie nationale exhaustive axée sur les politiques et les programmes qui aiderait les familles et les communautés à stimuler l'acquisition du langage et à accéder au besoin à des services de diagnostic et d'intervention précoce pour leurs jeunes enfants. Cet article souligne le rôle fondamental du langage chez les enfants pour qu'ils réussissent à long terme sur les plans scolaire, social et économique, l'importance des langues ancestrales pour l'identité culturelle et le sentiment d'appartenance ainsi que les contributions d'une éventuelle stratégie multisectorielle à niveaux multiples pour faire en sorte que les enfants autochtones obtiennent des résultats optimaux dans le développement de la parole et de l'acquisition du langage.

Giving Aboriginal children the best start in life is one of the most important investments we can make in Canada. This is especially so when we consider that the proportion of Aboriginal Canadians under 5 years of age is approximately 70% greater compared to the proportion of non-Aboriginal young children, which represents a birth rate 1.5 times that of the birth rate of non-Aboriginal peoples (Statistics Canada 2006). A particularly effective investment in this area would consist of supports for parents and other caregivers to engage in responsive language-mediated interactions with infants and young children at home. This should be complemented by community programs designed to stimulate language development.

Language develops most rapidly from infancy throughout the preschool years. Likewise, language delays and difficulties are best prevented and treated during these

early years. Decades of research in neuroscience, developmental psychology and economics has produced voluminous evidence showing that early interventions supporting the development of less advantaged children have much higher returns than later interventions after children have started formal schooling (Heckman 2006). This article summarizes what is known about language development of Aboriginal Canadians under six years old and efforts that are being taken, as well as those that could be taken, to support optimal language development among this growing young demographic.

NEED FOR A FOCUSED PROGRAM OF RESEARCH

It is worth stressing at the outset that there is an urgent need for research on Aboriginal children's speech-language development, needs and responses to interventions. At the time of writing, there were no population-based data for characterizing the speech-language strengths or difficulties of First Nations, Inuit or Métis children. Aboriginal children were not systematically sampled in the two national longitudinal cohort studies of the growth and development of Canadian children and youth (*National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth and Understanding the Early Years*). Further, most Aboriginal young children are never evaluated by developmental specialists (e.g., infant development consultants, child care practitioners, speech-language pathologists, pediatricians); speech-language services are extremely limited for children living on-reserve, since they are not eligible for provincially funded services and this is a service that most First Nations do not contract; and, well over half of Aboriginal children do not have access to child care programs where their speech-language development could be monitored and difficulties noticed. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, most existing monitoring, screening or diagnostic tools have not been validated for use with Aboriginal children: screening and assessment tools in current use in Canada are generally rooted in research involving children of European heritage in urban settings with English or French as their first language.[1]

Based on existing research on the living conditions, family life challenges, and health of Aboriginal youngsters and their academic outcomes, it is generally recognized that Aboriginal children face more challenges to fulfilling their developmental potential than any other population in Canada (Ball 2008; Council of Ministers of Education 2004). Overall, 52.1% of Aboriginal children are living below the poverty line, and have the highest rate of poverty compared to other equity groups: visible minority children and children with disabilities.

Low language proficiency may be an important contributor to these high rates of exclusion: strong language proficiency can increase the probability of success in school, participation in the work-force, economic security, and social inclusion (Brid and Akerman 2005). It is generally believed, though not well documented, that Aboriginal children are at elevated risk of language delays (Canada Council on Learning 2007; Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities 2003). At national and provincial conferences and training workshops involving practitioners in Aboriginal Infant Development and Early Childhood Care and Development, urgent calls are repeatedly heard for increased supports for home and community-based language stimulation programs and for diagnostic and speech-language therapy services. Speech-language delays and deficits have been identified as the most frequently occurring type of developmental challenge for Aboriginal young children seen in Aboriginal Head Start programs (e.g., Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada 2002), by the B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society (2004), and by programs surveyed by a Task Force of the Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs (deLeeuw, Fiske and Greenwood 2002).

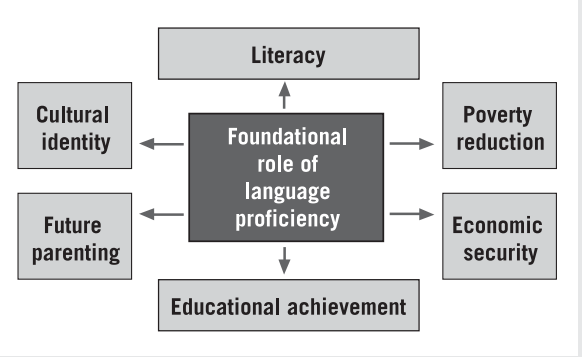
THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN DEVELOPMENT

Speech-language skills play a role in nearly all developmental outcomes, as shown in Figure 1. Early language learning contributes in primary ways to learning in all other domains; and, makes learning at later ages more efficient and easier, promoting self-motivation meaning that one is more likely to continue (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). In particular, it is well known that success in school requires vast exposure to, practice with, and proficiency in oral language (Hart and Risley 1995). More generally, weak language skills in the preschool years are a strong predictor of lower academic achievement, particularly for children in lower socio-economic families (Schuelle 2001). Early interventions to increase language proficiency can significantly increase later success in school (Campbell and Ramey 1994).

HERITAGE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

For many children, being able to communicate across generations in their families and communities, and laying down the foundation for a coherent and positive cultural identity with links to the land, means being able to speak their heritage language (Battiste 2000; Norris 2007). Speaking the ancestral language is also seen by some as

FIGURE 1: The foundational role of speech-language proficiency.



Source: Jessica Ball 2008.

important to a child's spiritual life (Canadian Heritage 2005; Kirkness 2002). Yet, Aboriginal children are increasingly less likely to learn their Aboriginal language as a first language, if at all (Statistics Canada 2006): approximately 16% of Aboriginal children under the age of 14 years speak an Aboriginal language as a first or additional language (Norris 2007).

A basic value in Canada is that, regardless of where children live in this country and regardless of their ethnicity, programs for promoting their optimal development should be accessible, available and linguistically and culturally appropriate (Canadian Centre for Justice 2001). At the same time, colonial policies and values have excluded Aboriginal histories, cultures and languages from public school curricula (Battiste 2000; Philipson 1992). Programs that help Aboriginal children learn their heritage language, rather than treating European-heritage language skills as normative, can support their cultural identity formation, cultural knowledge and connectedness with their cultural community (Crystal 1997; Hebert 2000; Ignace 1998).

ABORIGINAL ENGLISH DIALECTS

The existence of Aboriginal English dialects in Canada is a factor that needs to be considered in the context of policy approaches to improving learning outcomes of Aboriginal children. Canadian Aboriginal English dialects have been studied by the linguistic community to a limited extent (see review by Ball, Bernhardt and Deby 2006). Linguistic features of these varieties of English may include vestiges of Indigenous languages carried over to English (or possibly French), resulting in variations on the 'standard' variety of the dominant language that are unique to particular heritage language groups. Further, language socialization in Aboriginal families embodies their cultures and includes varying pragmatics of communication that may also involve vestiges of their Indigenous language and traditional culture (Bernardt, Ball and Deby 2007). This phenomenon is not restricted to Canada: in Australia, Aboriginal English has been described as the main language of 80% of Aboriginal Australians (Speech Pathology Australia, Fact Sheet 2.4).

There is little understanding of the extent to which some Aboriginal children's use of a non-standard variety of English or French may be misinterpreted as language delay or language deficit and, thus, contribute to alarming high estimates of the prevalence of speech-language pathology among Aboriginal children (i.e., false positive interpretations of language pathology). Several scholars have noted that Aboriginal children, whose home language is either a non-standard variant of English, French or an Indigenous language, need some kind of bridging or transition support to prepare them to succeed in school (Philpott 2004; WaltonWalton 1993; Wright, Taylor and Macarthur 2000). Pioneering work has been done in Australia on 'English as a Second Dialect' (Malcom, Haig, Koningsberg, Rochecouste, Collard, Hill and Cahill 1999). Several provinces in Canada now have policies and funding to support school-based ESD programs; however, no report have come to light on the extent or nature of ESD initiatives involving Aboriginal children. Given the findings noted above, this is an area that warrants greater research attention.

AUDITORY PROBLEMS

Ear infections (*otitis media*) are a good example of the complex determinants of language development among Aboriginal children. Ear infections are much more prevalent among Aboriginal children (from 2.1% to 78% across communities) compared to non-Aboriginal children (about 1%), especially in the north (WHO/CIBA). In the High Arctic, an average of 67% of Inuit children has suffered some hearing loss by the time they reach school-age (Bowd 2005). In Aboriginal children, prevalent causes of ear infections are thought to include hereditary and constitutional factors, infant feeding practices, sleeping position and mold in poorly ventilated homes. Incidence of hearing loss may be reduced by addressing care-giving practices (e.g., promoting breastfeeding and nutritious solid foods, positioning babies on their back to sleep); ventilation in homes and other environmental risk factors (e.g., exposure to smoke and organochlorines); and, increasing community-based capacity to detect and refer affected children for treatment (Bowd 2005). These steps in turn could prevent speech-language delays and deficits, and also limit secondary effects such as learning challenges, social and behavioral difficulties.

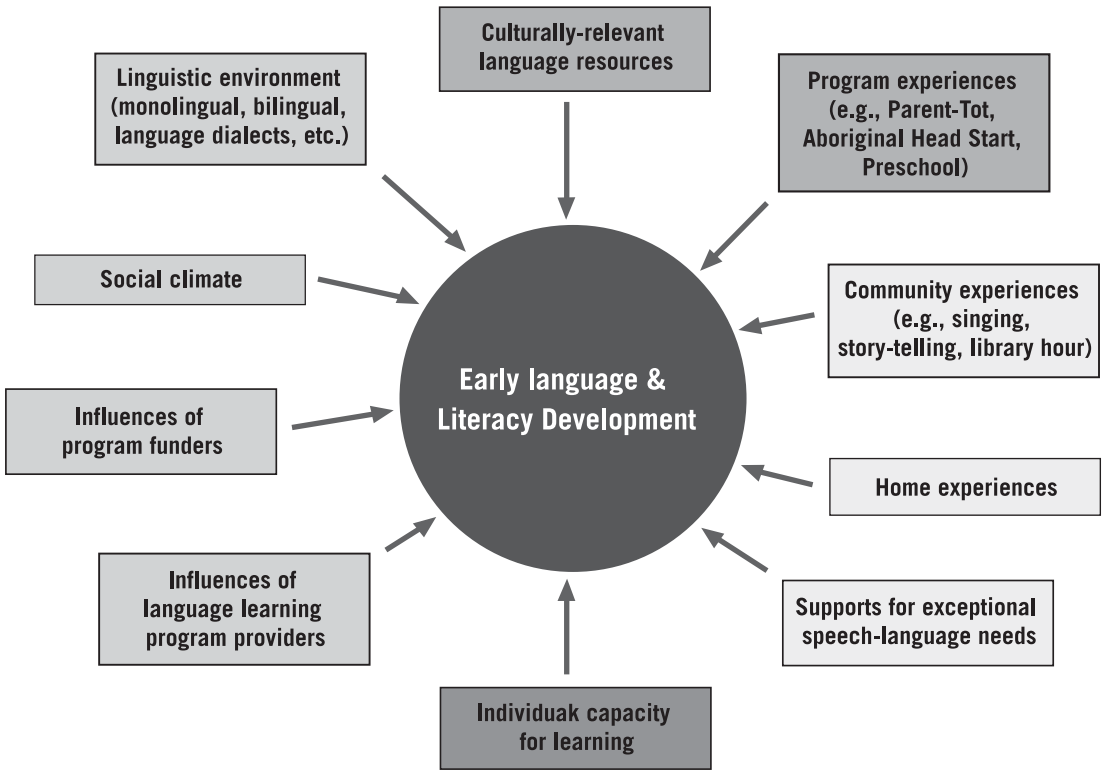
SUPPORTING EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Over the past decade, there have been substantial, primarily federal, initiatives to create quality Aboriginal early learning and child care programs. There are a number of community-based and community-involving programs aimed at supporting the language and literacy development of Aboriginal children. These include: Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities and First Nations Head start, Aboriginal Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, Hanen's You Make the Difference-Aboriginal Version, the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program and Moe the Mouse created by British Columbia's Aboriginal Child Care Society. In addition, individual communities have developed approaches for use in home visiting, nurseries and preschools, drawing on curriculum common to most early childhood programs, such as music and movement, story-telling, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy games as well as parenting skills programs. Many of these programs are culturally-rich and aim in part to reinforce positive cultural identity of Aboriginal youngsters and their families.

In spite of efforts to evaluate some of these initiatives, no body of evidence is yet available for identifying their impacts. Nevertheless, these community-based programs for Aboriginal young children and their families constitute an existing infrastructure in some communities within which capacity could be developed for early language facilitation and intervention.

Given the importance of early language development for social inclusion, cultural identity, cognitive development, school readiness and educational achievement, new investments of federal funds are needed for a national strategy to support Aboriginal early language and literacy. Figure 2 presents factors which can be optimized in a national strategy to support optimal language development among Aboriginal young children.

FIGURE 2: Key influences on early language development



Source: Jessica Ball, 2008.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DRIVEN APPROACHES

Recognizing the limited transportability of social knowledge and practice, many Aboriginal communities and organizations, along with researchers, educators and practitioners, are encouraging community-driven, dialogical and open-ended approaches to supporting children's development (Ball and Pence 2006; Bernhard 1995; Cole 1989). Community members are uniquely positioned to identify core features of language socialization, to understand the contexts of child development and care in the community and to offer insights to specialists, educators and investigators about the conditions, needs and goals of a family or community. The ethics and the prospective utility of collaborative, strengths-based approaches have been demonstrated by cross-cultural investigators (Ball 2002; Crago 1992; Johnston and Wong 2002; van Kleek 1994). A national strategy that includes a stream for supporting Aboriginal early language development should support implementation and evaluation of culturally grounded approaches developed in consultation with families and communities as demonstration projects.

AN ECOLOGICALLY COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY

Figure 3 portrays the inter-dependent ecological systems in which Aboriginal young children and their families are nested. These are contexts where supportive interventions can be introduced to promote optimal language development. This schema situates the family as the core – or heart – of language-mediated relationships between caregivers and young children. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) also prioritized family development and community-based programs for children and families as the two most promising entry-points for promoting healthy communication, support and early detection of needs for extra supports.

Investments in the areas identified in Figure 3 would yield new knowledge and a potentially effective system of supports driven by Aboriginal community agendas and organizations. Partnerships across Aboriginal organizations, relevant Canadian Centres of Excellence, post-secondary institutions and such sectors as health, education and child care could support the development of new resources, capacity and program strategies. Support for Aboriginal early language and literacy facilitation can be expected to:

- reduce high rates of referral for speech-language therapy with their attendant expenses, long wait times, and dependencies on external supports;
- reduce high rates of diversion of Aboriginal children at school-entry to special programs for learning support, with their attendant sequelae of social stigma and exclusions;
- counteract prevalent misconstructions of cultural and language differences as communication and parenting deficits;
- promote cultural continuity and self-esteem;
- help to retain endangered heritage; and,
- promote the social inclusion of Aboriginal children within the fabric of Canadian society.

NOTE

[1] This means that until new assessment tools have been developed, of the validity of existing tools have been established and norms have been gathered, any epidemiological data obtained through "universal" screening and assessment of Aboriginal children would need to be interpreted and acted upon with extreme caution.

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FIGURE 3: Systems of support for Aboriginal young children's language development.



Source: Jessica Ball 2008.

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