

Language Development Among Aboriginal children with FASD:

Instructional approaches in a two-generation preschool

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Introduction

Aboriginal children in Canada face an uphill battle in reaching their potential from the moment their parents meet, and continue to encounter more obstacles to success than their non-Aboriginal peers throughout their lives (Ball, 2008). They are more likely to be born with FASD, to adolescent parents and/or single mothers, come from a low-income family (Levin, 1995), and be involved in the child welfare system than their non-Aboriginal peers (Statistics Canada, 2004). In addition, those Aboriginal children with FASD, especially if it is undiagnosed and untreated, not only struggle with reading and writing, but have fundamental problems with the pre-requisite skills for language learning, such as memory, attention, social reciprocity and fine motor skills (Pei, Job, Poth, O'Brien-Langer, & Tang, 2015). They are then at very high risk for developing secondary disabilities and encountering challenges with school, law enforcement, substance abuse and mental health (Streissguth, 2004). These conditions are considered by some as “intergenerational effects” of the Indian Residential School system implemented by the Canadian federal government, yet our educational system has not been designed to mitigate and address these increased risk factors for Aboriginal children. Although one of the prime objectives of the Residential School system was to teach Aboriginal students how to speak and write in English, Aboriginal children continue to exhibit lower language skills than their non-Aboriginal peers.

Low language skill attainment among Aboriginal peoples has been linked to lowered life outcomes, such as low education level, low income, substance abuse, early pregnancy and interactions with law enforcement and child welfare services (Ball, 2009). This is especially the case for individuals with FASD (Streissguth, 2004). A cyclic pattern begins to emerge when we factor in studies that suggest that without appropriate interventions, each of these adverse life events in a parent can contribute to delays and disabilities in language skill development for their

children. Studies further suggest that early intervention is key, as the language skills that are acquired in the first few years of life, such as receptive vocabulary, serve as key building blocks for the rest to follow, such as reading comprehension and writing composition. Preschool may be an institution where the most effective interventions can be made to break this cycle of under-achievement and unmet potential, yet only half of Aboriginal children get to go to preschool (Benzies et al., 2011b), and most of the preschools available have not been designed or taught with them in mind.

More recently, however, a new type of “two-generation” preschools (St. Pierre, Layzer, Barnes, Barnett, & Boocock, 1998) have been created, with the express intent of trying to reduce the types of risks Aboriginal children often face. Benzies, Tough, Edwards, Mychasiuk, and Donnelly conducted a series of studies and wrote several papers with additional colleagues on different aspects of a particular two-generation preschool, the CUPS One World Child Development Centre (2011b). This paper will use literature available on factors that increase and mitigate language learning delays and disabilities in order to analyze to what extent this two-generation preschool may offer promising practices that ought to be replicated and offered across the country to close the achievement gap for Aboriginal learners.

According to their website, the CUPS One World Child Development Centre is a multi-cultural, two generation preschool located in Calgary, Alberta, that is designed for children from families struggling with low income and/or trauma and funded through external donations (One World, 2016). An initial study found that 36% of the students were of Aboriginal heritage, as opposed to children from newcomer or settler families (Benzies et al., 2011b). One World models many evidence-based practices associated with improved outcomes in language learning, and offers the results to back it up: the longer they attended the program, children of Aboriginal

ancestry improved their receptive language skills (Benzies et al., 2011a), which are key for school-readiness and later academic success. The Aboriginal participants gained almost 10 standard deviation units in receptive vocabulary on average during their time at One World, an improvement that was maintained until at least age 7 (Benzies et al., 2011b).

Evidence-Based Practices Implemented at One World Preschool

Benzies et al. (2011a) used Dunn and Dunn's 1997 Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, third edition (PPVT-III) to test the children's receptive vocabulary, both before and after they participated in One World's two-generation preschool program. By identifying pictures in response to spoken words, children being assessed using PPVT-III are able to show their comprehension of words even if they are not able to express them yet. This measure of receptive vocabulary is used as a key indicator of school readiness because delays or limits in receptive vocabulary will lead to problems with expressive vocabulary, oral comprehension and eventually to difficulty in learning how to read in grade one. Researchers have demonstrated that early assessment and appropriate interventions can help children with delays 'catch-up' to their peers through successful instruction in preschool and kindergarten. The question is, what does One World offer Aboriginal children and their families to support language learning, and how effective is this two-generation preschool in providing interventions needed to get them ready for school?

High Quality Program and Staff

According to Benzies et al., One World provided the children with high quality, well-funded, early child education that was taught by certified and experienced teachers, and offered all staff ongoing professional development opportunities (2011a). Lack of access to such a program is a known risk of language delays (Snow et al., 1998) and improving Aboriginal

families' access to high quality preschool was one of the recommendations made by Ball (2009). One World also ensured a low child to teacher ratio, which allowed them to create a generative curriculum that motivated learning by integrating the children's interests and provide more intense and individualized assessments, instruction and interventions for those students who required them (Benzies et al., 2011a). This strategy is well supported by Kirk, Gallagher and Anastasiow, who advocate the importance of providing culturally diverse learners with books that appeal to their interest (2003). Unfortunately, neither One World's website nor the reports by Benzies et al. (2011a, 2011b) discuss the particular curriculum, instructional approaches nor specific interventions used at the preschool in order to improve receptive language skills.

Early Assessment and Expert Intervention

Ball pointed out that due to factors such as the remote location of many reserves, and the fact that they are often not eligible for provincially-funded services, many Aboriginal children are not assessed for language delays, nor provided with appropriate interventions (2009). Ball adds that an increased risk of auditory problems and lack of screening for them is a particular problem for some. One World teachers have addressed this need by regularly informally assessing the children and they referred those in need of developmental testing to an in-house assessment team of all the licensed professionals required to identify delays, create IPPs, design and implement interventions and arrange government-funded support (Benzies et al., 2011a). In addition, One World works hard to create a highly predictable environment likely to help students challenged by trauma, upheaval, FASD and other disabilities who benefit from routine. IPPs were forwarded to the community schools once kindergartners graduated, enabling supports and interventions to be continued as appropriate during the rest of each designated child's schooling.

Caregiver Synergy

A reported strength of two-generation preschool programs (St. Pierre, Layzer, & Barnes, 1995; St. Pierre, Layzer, Barnes, Barnett, & Boocock, 1998) is that by addressing the needs of both children and parents in a cooperative way, they can reduce the negative development outcomes associated with low socio-economic status (Hutchings et al., 2007). At least four home visits per year enabled teachers to share successes and strategies with caregivers, who were encouraged to participate in preschool activities. Honig (2007) advocated enthusiastically for home visits by teachers, arguing that visitations can support parents in fostering rich language environments for their children at home, which is critical for oral language development.

Supports for Family Health and Stability

Children from low-income families face increased risk of not reaching their academic potential for a number of reasons, and educational institutions are uniquely positioned to help (Levin, 1995). According to Benzies et al., (2011a), One World preschool students were provided with on-site access to pediatricians, community health nurses, and free hearing, vision and dental services through field trips supported by family support workers. Healthy meals were provided at the preschool, as well as safe transportation to and from home, and before/after preschool childcare as needed for students or siblings. Caregivers were supported by a six week program of regular classes in child development, parenting and life skills, along with optional recreational and educational classes. Home visits, telephone contact and advocacy support was provided to help families access food, affordable housing, legal services, child services and counselling, as requested. Post-secondary scholarships have been set aside for preschool participants to encourage families to use the strategies they have learned to set and reach their academic goals. These measures address some of the most obstructive barriers Aboriginal

families face in providing for their children, according to Ball (2009). By providing services directly to low income families that would have trouble meeting their needs otherwise, One World sought to reduce caregiver stress and improve self-esteem, confidence and positive parenting approaches, as preschoolers who are encouraged to express their needs and speak through positive interaction with caregivers have improved oral language and reading skills by the time they are in grade 2 (Norman-Jackson, 1982).

If successful in ensuring higher levels of stability in the home and school lives of children and caregivers involved in the program, these measures would be especially helpful for those families struggling with FASD. As individuals with FASD are particularly vulnerable to unexpected changes in relationships, environment and routines, their language learning needs will be better served through these aspects of One World's approach than a more traditional preschool which does not involve caregivers nor offer extra supports for families.

Missed Opportunities at One World Preschool

While the Aboriginal preschool participants in One World did on average improve their receptive vocabulary by 10 standard deviation units and the longer they stayed involved in the program, the more their receptive language skills improved, the program still did not achieve all of its goals (Benzies et al., 2011a). Unfortunately, these Aboriginal children did not quite catch up to their developmentally-typical, non-Aboriginal peers, and their caregivers did not achieve their goals of reduced parenting stress nor reduced risk for child maltreatment (Benzies et al., 2011b). Not only is this concerning for the general welfare of the children in their care, but more specifically for our topic, the children's early language skills will likely continue to be negatively impacted by the directives and prohibition-oriented communication associated with low SES parents, compared to the highly encouraging and positive parental communication of higher SES

parents (Hart & Risley, 1995). Upon reflection and discussion with the caregivers involved in their study, Benzies et al. suggested that perhaps six weeks of classes on very specific parenting techniques are not enough to disrupt the intergenerational transmission of maladaptive coping behaviours developed through a lifetime of poverty, loss and grieving (2011b). They put forward the idea that opportunities for culturally-appropriate spiritual and emotional healing might be a helpful addition to support caregiver resiliency at a deeper level. Ball would add that including study in heritage languages, education about pre-colonial Aboriginal parenting strategies (2009). In addition, by the time a child is in preschool, their caregivers have already established many of their parenting practices, and the children have already passed important time-oriented milestones. A program to support infant caregiving may be in order to close the remaining gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children's receptive vocabulary skills.

While another study with a control group and larger sample size would be helpful to confirm Benzies et al.'s results, especially if conducted in different regions across Canada, One World offers a way forward for those interested in helping to close the achievement gap and end the cycle of poverty and trauma so many Aboriginal families face. Using the studies that we do have, however, the One World program might be improved if it empowered parents to seek personal recovery and planning for a more positive future by directly addressing racism, colonialism and the intergenerational impacts of the residential school system (Benzies et al., 2011b) in its caregiver program curriculum. At first I was concerned that One World could have provided more culturally-appropriate education focused on Aboriginal ways of learning, knowing and being for the children as well. However, according to Benzies et al., the Aboriginal community was in fact included in the creation of the program name, mandate and flexible design through a caregiver advisory committee and soliciting input from long-time CUPS Family

Resource Center Aboriginal clients (2011b). It remains to be seen whether the spiritual and cultural values shared through these mechanisms made their way into the instructional approaches and educational materials, however, as neither CUPS nor Benzies et al. describe the preschool curriculum or type of interventions used by the in house speech language therapists to try to improve the receptive language skills of the children identified with language delays through assessment (2011a; 2011b). One World's focus seems to be on the structural supports of the program to improve non-educational determinants of family and child development, as well as education of caregivers in an attachment-based form of parenting.

True mutuality, where schools and families respect and work together to improve instructional practices at home and at school are required to capitalize on the benefits of synergy (Levin, 1995), yet One World seems to prioritize instruction of parents over engaging them in a truly family and community-driven approach. Ball has argued that a culturally-grounded approach will likely offer a better fit to meet the needs, strengths and goals of participants (2009). For example, providing meals based on the Canadian food guide ignores the fact that Aboriginal clients may know that they need canned salmon as a source of calcium and are more likely to be intolerant of milk and gluten than children whose ancestors have been domesticating cattle and cultivating wheat for millennia. Further, Ball argues that Aboriginal children may be mis-represented in verbal IQ tests and assessments for language delays due to the under-recognized existence of Aboriginal English dialects (2009). Furthermore, Benzies et al. neglected to acknowledge and address the religious foundations of the organization running the preschool, which could be troubling for Aboriginal families who have negative associations with both school and churches due to the role Residential Schools may have played in their families' history of trauma.

According to their website, CUPS seems to not have any Aboriginal decision-makers on its board, nor Aboriginal staff working with the children, nor is it making any effort to prioritize hiring staff with Aboriginal heritage or knowledge of Aboriginal culture (CUPS One World Child Development Centre, 2016). There is no imagery of Aboriginal families or reference to them in any way, even though they represent the largest cultural group in Benzies et al.'s study (2011a). Non-Aboriginal teachers have unfortunately been proven to carry many unhelpful attributions and stereotypes about Aboriginal children and families that can interfere with assessment and expectations, to the detriment of student learning (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012). Ensuring that Aboriginal children have Aboriginal mentors at school is an important aspect of many Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements in B.C. Any efforts to replicate the One World model here should make a dedicated effort to avoid the paternalism, however well-intentioned, that may be present at One World.

Improving Language Learning for Aboriginal Families

One World is not the only preschool program aimed at improving language skills and school readiness of Aboriginal Children. According to Ball, there are a number of preschool programs across Canada designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal children and their families, including those who are challenged by FASD, and a common feature of these is to ensure educational activities are infused with Aboriginal cultural learning that boosts positive identity and confidence (2009). Honig reported that learning, listening to and participating in nursery rhymes, song, poetry, jokes, theater and other cultural uses of language and meaning-making help children improve their oral language skills (2009). Instead of reproducing cultural forms which maintain that European ancestry is the norm, educators may want to adapt Honig's recommendations to search out and include Aboriginal cultural forms of story-telling, dance,

singing, and art to stimulate conversation. In order to bring authentic cultural knowledge into the preschool program, honoraria could be offered to family members willing and able to share cultural and language lessons, instead of always re-asserting the colonial dependency relationship typical of a program such as One World, where supports are offered for free, but participants must earn below a certain low income threshold to participate. Teachers could also work to bring in or even facilitate the creation of culturally appropriate children's books that are bilingual in heritage Aboriginal languages, standard English, and perhaps even trilingual, with Aboriginal English dialects.

Conclusion

CUPS One World Child Development Centre offers an empirically tested model that proves that Aboriginal children with delays in acquiring receptive vocabulary can in fact be supported in making significant gains in catching up to their non-Aboriginal peers in school readiness skills. Evidence-based practices that serve as key components of this second-generation preschool can and should be replicated elsewhere. Those wishing to reproduce their positive results should strive to hire an adequate number of qualified, experienced staff and fully fund a high quality program that is designed and implemented with the input and active involvement of the children and families it serves. Programming designed to support caregivers in providing a nurturing and rich language environment at home will help as well. A team of onsite medical professionals and experts in assessment and intervention will help maximize the benefits of early intervention in the case of delays and disabilities, and teachers and social workers who coordinate their efforts to support families through home visits will ensure children who need help do not fall through the cracks. Supports offered in the form of transportation, childcare, legal advice, and access to food, housing and counselling help stabilize families that

are often disrupted by economic hardship and trauma. In order to improve One World's approach to disrupting the cycle of poverty and trauma in Aboriginal families, however, the curriculum of both the preschool and the programming for caregivers needs to recognize and address the intergenerational impacts of the Indian Residential School System, incorporate Aboriginal cultural components and be taught by and for Aboriginal peoples themselves. By partnering with Aboriginal community groups and First Nations, multi-cultural two-generation preschools can help create a better future for all Canadians.

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