‘AT-PROMISE’: FIRST NATIONS’ PRESCHOOLER’S ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In

LEADERSHIP AND TRAINING

ROYAL ROADS UNIVERSITY
March, 2003

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There have been so many people who have influenced me as I travelled this journey. People who have helped me, and watched my children, when assignments were due. People who listened while I worked through an assignment. People who read my work and encouraged me to keep going. I owe you all so much.

First, my parents: they believed in me and my potential. They provided encouragement and assistance when it seemed all too much.

My family has lived with me during this journey, and they deserve a great deal of thanks for their patience with me while I was working. I hope that they have learned a valuable life lesson about applying themselves to something they really want to achieve. My gratitude goes out to husband and my boys, who were so patient and understanding. My husband helped me on the days when I felt the urge to procrastinate. Many a time he was heard to say, "You can't read *War and Peace* in a night, Laura." Every time, he made me chuckle. Knowing he was going to say that to me was as dependable as he was. Life at home certainly would have been messier and hungrier without him. I love you, Norman, now and forever.

My sister and her husband were always willing to help out with the children when I needed a day to myself to work. My sister has been a friend and a cheerleader. I love you, Tanya.

My niece Sandy was incredible. She lived with me during the first year of this experience, and I could always count on her help when I needed it. She is one of the many children who have experienced the challenges of our current educational system, and one for whom I still hold many hopes and dreams. I know within her is the potential to lead the next generation. She has the capability to serve as a role model for a new generation of students. Seize the challenge, Sandy: you are gifted with children and they need the benefit of your talents, care, and experience.

The members of my professional book club—Joanne, Susan, Marni, Cheryl, Anne, Chris, and Barb—were a great sounding board. Their constant desire for new learning motivated me. Their wisdom and expertise as classroom practitioners has inspired me and has made me a better teacher. Thank you.

Also, the members of my MALT community. What can I say? We each brought unique life experiences, talents, and wisdom to the group. I have grown as a person for having experienced this with you. I cherish the time that we spent together.

Finally, I would like to mention my dear friend, Lisa. She was a lifelong learner. She is gone now but never forgotten. Many people will come in and out of my life, but Lisa has left footprints in my heart.

Thank you all!

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my children. They are the future. I hope for them an education that is filled with a sense of belonging, a strong sense of academic self-esteem, and pride in their culture. They belong to the Mamalilikulla-que'qwa'sot'em band, and have many reasons to be proud of their First Nations heritage.

This work is also dedicated to my husband. He has been my rock. Without him many things would have been considerably more difficult. He offered me encouragement when I needed it. He parented when I was busy. I could always count on his support. He definitely made this journey possible.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of structuring my written report using a medicine wheel appealed to me. The medicine wheel is circular; like a wedding ring, it symbolizes no beginning, no end.

> In its most simplistic definition, the Medicine Wheel is a symbol of ALL creation, of all races of people, birds, fish, animals, trees and stones. Its shape is that of a wagon wheel, made of stones; the circular shape of the wheel represents the earth, the sun, the moon, the cycles of life, the seasons, and day to night. (Two Dogs, 1998, ¶ 1)

The movement of the medicine wheel can be symbolic of the movement of the project. The concept of four chapters instead of six would give reference to the medicine wheel and the importance in First Nations culture about the number four. The number four is found repeatedly and is considered sacred: "the four directions, the four grandfathers, four worlds, four winds, four elements (earth, air, water, and fire) and the four races of man" (Two Dogs, 1998, ¶ 2).

The use of a medicine wheel as a framework for written work has been used by other authors. Calliou (1995) used it in her essay *Peacekeeping Actions at Home: A Medicine Wheel Model for a Peacekeeping Pedagogy.* Battiste and Barman (1995) used it as an organizational tool for the collection of essays in the book *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds.* Hampton (1995) used it for his 1988 doctoral dissertation at Harvard University. I now adapt it for my action research project.

The very nature of the medicine wheel implies movement. The nature of action research is likewise non-linear. Many frameworks can be imposed upon the wheel: the span of a life, a day, and the seasons are only a few. I have borrowed and adapted the comparison of a seasonal cycle to the research journey as explained within this document.

The circle begins in the east with spring. East is the direction of the rising sun, the beginning of a new day. Spring is a season that offers a new beginning. It reminds us of a time when life begins again, when plants and animals are young, and it is the dawn of a new opportunity. The research project begins with an opportunity, a question, and a review of the organization and its documents.

As we move south into summer, the sun shines, the days are longer, and opportunities exist for much to happen. The length of the days and the warmth of this season fill people with a sense of potential and positive energy. This season holds the energy needed for the gathering of references and a review of the literature.

The western side of the wheel brings autumn; the leaves change colour, the animals prepare for winter, and days grow colder. It is a time of loss, but also of harvesting and abundance. This season's purpose prepares us for winter, and in this document it is where we will examine the research methods and the data gathering tools, and where we will explain the study conduct, including the findings, conclusions, and recommendations. In the voices and experiences of my participants comes the richness and abundance of substance we associate with the harvesting and abundance of autumn.

To the north lies winter. Days are long and cold, and it is a time of isolation and reflection. The Winter section of this report brings the research implications, opportunities for further research, and lessons learned. The end of winter brings us back to a season of new opportunities.

SPRING – STUDY BACKGROUND

The Problem/Opportunity

The newborn Spring awakens slowly.
I watch the ice melt as the leaves come budding through.
Each day brings a little more growth.
The animals, the plants, the world is full with new birth.
The air sings with joy and the promise of warm days ahead. (TealMoon, n.d., ¶ 1)

The wheel and this project begin to the east with spring—the opportunity. Spring is the season of new life, plants, and animals. The world is full of promise in the days ahead. This opportunity stems from a past season of darkness. Both the residential schooling system and the educational system have failed by being unable to appropriately meet the learning needs of First Nations students. The dawn of spring for this project began with the acknowledgement on the part of the district that we could be doing more to help First Nations learners succeed in our schools.

Within the 1999-2000 School District 72 *Annual Report*, Julie MacRae, Superintendent of Schools, wrote that

> one of the education highlights of the year was the negotiation and signing of an Educational Improvement Agreement with our local First Nations'

> partners. In many ways this agreement exemplifies our highest aspirations for all our learners—that despite their different histories, circumstances and unique learning needs, they will be encouraged and supported by programs and services that will enable them to not only graduate but achieve to the very best of their individual potential. Their future success depends on being able to be literate, numerate, and socially responsible. With the continued commitment of the time, talent and energy of all our education partners, we can help them fulfill their promise and, in doing so, also fulfill our own! (MacRae, 2000, p. 3)

I work three part-time jobs within the school district. My experiences with each job play a role in my research question. As the district First Nations teacher, I teach two programs: First Nations Kindergarten and English Skills Development (ESD). Both programs have a literacy focus, which has led me to spend time thinking about how we can improve our First Nations students' literacy skills. My third job is teaching a preschool Parent and Tot program. This program is a free drop-in style literacy program for children in an inner-city neighbourhood. Witnessing my former students move onto kindergarten and experience a great deal of success has been a motivating factor for my desire to work with the First Nations parents in readying their children for academic success.

As I see the problem, the First Nations children are not experiencing immediate success with early literacy experiences because they are lacking the necessary oral language development. A child's oral language development acts as a scaffold to further literacy experiences. “Since oral language provides the foundation and framework for written language acquisition, a mismatch can cause a lack of success in learning to read and write within a school situation” (Braunger & Lewis, 1998, p. 18).

Within my role as an ESD teacher, I have recognized the extent to which the lack of word knowledge can hinder reading comprehension. I have witnessed that it is possible for these children to decode words and have no knowledge or understanding of what they mean. The ability to name even common objects has significant implications for their ability to extract meaning from text. Consider a child who looks at a comb and calls it a “hair brushing thing.” When he or she sees the word comb, will he or she know what it is? My experience has shown me that too often the answer is no. Dickinson and Tabors (2002) have found that kindergarten children’s scores for receptive vocabulary, narrative production, and emergent literacy skills

> were *highly predictive* of the scores on reading comprehension and receptive vocabulary in fourth and in seventh grade. Apparently the level of language and literacy skills that the children acquired by the end of their kindergarten year provided a strong basis for the acquisition of literacy and vocabulary skills in the later elementary years. (p. 17)

Brain research (Doherty, 1997) has told us that the critical period for language development is prior to age five. In fact, Diamond and Hopson (1998) explained that

> once the child's full-blown language explosion detonates at eighteen to twenty months, he or she will learn words at the phenomenal average rate of ten or more per day, or a new word at least every ninety minutes throughout much of childhood. The result, Steven Pinker estimates, is a vocabulary of 13,000 words at age six and by high school graduation, depending on literacy level, perhaps 60,000 to 120,000! (p. 135)

If the critical period for language development is prior to school entry, and a student's kindergarten abilities are predictive of later success, then early oral language development is critical. My project seeks to determine an answer to the research question, "How can a school-based educator partner with a First Nations community to facilitate oral language development workshops for the parents of preschool children?"

Significance of the Opportunity

In order to capitalize on this critical period of language development and foster receptive and expressive vocabulary, which in turn should enhance literacy skills, it is vital to begin at home with the parents. Noted linguist Noam Chomsky said that "language learning is not really something the child does, it is something that happens to the child placed in an appropriate environment" (as cited by Diamond & Hopson, 1998, p. 133)

This opportunity is further significant because of what happens to children who enter the intermediate grades (four to seven) and encounter more and more vocabulary as well as teaching which relies more heavily on textbooks. Children who are able to decode these words are capable of temporarily deceiving teachers and parents: they must understand these words if they can decode them. Yet, reading is about comprehension, and we must remain vigilant to ensure that the student is reading for meaning. Enhancing the development of language abilities may in turn lead to enhanced comprehension (Dickinson & Smith, 1994) and this, ultimately, is what reading is all about.

> Language is essential to learning, and reading, as a specialized form of language, is not only a basic skill, it is an indispensable tool for critical and creative thinking. Literacy allows us to make connections between our own and others' experiences, to inquire systematically into important matters, to access, analyze and evaluate information and arguments. In short, literacy is key to success in school and beyond, for effective participation in the workforce, the community, and the body politic. This was true in the past—even more true in the future. (Braunger & Lewis, 1998, p. 1)

I also see this project as having significant implications because at least five of the seven performance goals of the Campbell River Aboriginal Education Improvement Agreement (AEIA) are directly related to literacy (First Nations Education Advisory Council, 2000). The relevant AEIA goals are to improve

- the Dogwood (grade 12 graduation certificate) completion rates;
- primary literacy;
- intermediate literacy and numeracy;
- participation and success rates in Math 11 and English 12; and
- attendance and family involvement. (First Nations Education Advisory Council, 2000)

It is my belief that an improvement in a child's early oral language development could positively influence graduation rates. Let's follow my thinking: Children with underdeveloped oral language skills are not able to extract meaning from text and gain understanding of new concepts. They begin to experience failure at school on assignments and tests. This failure hurts their self-esteem and leads to further academic disappointment. This academic disappointment can lead to course failure at the high school level, which may lead to dropping out of high school. Likewise, the opposite may be said for a child who is able to extract meaning from text, succeed with assignments, and perform well in various subject areas. This should improve attendance and graduation (Dogwood completion) rates.

This project has the potential for a number of tangible and intangible benefits. In the long term, school success rates could be improved. In the short term, children will have increased opportunities to develop their oral language skills and parents can feel supported and empowered to help their children. To achieve lasting improvement or change, we need to enable the participants from the community and support them as they learn to act on their own. Stringer (1996) explained that "the task in these circumstances is to provide a climate that gives people the sense that they are in control of their own lives, and that supports them as they take systematic action to improve their circumstances" (p. 32).

The First Nations people of Canada are struggling to reclaim their self-esteem. The *Indian Act* of 1876 stripped them of their human and civil rights. *The Power Within People* (Antone, Miller, & Myers, 1986) explained that the effects of this type of oppression are evident in the way the First Nations peoples are treating themselves, their families, and their communities. The authors examine "ethno-stress," and note that First Nations people have the highest rates of suicide, family breakdown, substance abuse, and alcoholism in both Canada and the United States. In my opinion, it is vital that I do not assume an authoritative position, but rather take on a partnership role as we learn together. This support should produce feelings of empowerment and success for the parents.

To truly understand their lives and support them, we need to hear the opinions and experiences of the First Nations people. Their perceptions of various factors, including parents' own school experiences, could play a vital role in the successful outcome of this project. "We must understand those perceptions if we want to understand human behaviour: what people *think* about the world influences how they *act* in it" (Palys, 1997, p. 35). Relationships built on effective communication skills and active listening will produce trust and improved relations between the school and the families.

Despite concerns I have about imposing my educational values and beliefs upon the First Nations people, it is an undeniable fact of living within our society that "literacy is the currency of success in our system" (Gordon, 2000b, ¶ 23). I believe that First Nations people do want to find ways to increase their children's success at school. I concur with the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal People's statement that "despite the painful experiences Aboriginal people carry with them from formal education systems, they still see education as the hope for the future, and they are determined to see education fulfill its promise" (p. 434). Together I think it is possible for this collaboration to fulfill the wishes of Sitting Bull: "Let's put our minds together and see what life can make for our children" (as cited by DuFour, 2001).

Potential Causes

It is with hesitation that I write this section. The issues and concerns surrounding First Nations people are interwoven and complex. As a result of living conditions imposed upon First Nations people, generations of families have suffered. The emotional climate surrounding many First Nations issues runs quite high. I can identify several issues which may contribute to the lack of oral language development with the First Nations people, including ethno-stress, academic failure, and language modelling (lack of verbal interaction or a different dialect).

The parents and grandparents of our students today often did not experience school positively and may be reluctant to advocate for an institution that was the source of feelings of failure and incompetence. The aboriginal rate of referral to special needs is excessively high. One can easily conclude that students' self-esteem is a contributing factor for the high rate of school drop-outs.

More attention is paid in the literature to the declining use of Aboriginal languages (Leavitt, 1995) than to the difficulties First Nations peoples are encountering with English. One of my teaching assignments is to assist children with language difficulties. The funding for this position falls under the English as a Second Language umbrella. The *English as a Second Language Policy Framework* stated that "some students speak variations of English that differ significantly from the English used in the broader Canadian society and in school; they may require ESL support. (In some literature this is referred to as English as a Second Dialect)" (BC Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 7).

A second aspect of language usage has to do with the lack of modelling. When parents use a different dialect of English, this is what they model for their children. It is also my belief that many of today's children (First Nations and non-First Nations) are victims of our own progress. It is much too easy to have a child watch a video or play a video game instead of interacting with them. Too many children lack oral language development, I believe, because adults are not talking with their children.

At a Parent's Club Conference I attended (May, 2002), sponsored by the provincial First Nations Education Advising Committee, the keynote speaker, Keith Pattison, former Director of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of British Columbia, stated that by the time children are six years old they have spent more time watching television than they will ever spend having conversations with their parents (Pattison, 2002). Children who are spoken with regularly have a larger expressive and receptive vocabulary. It is the children with insufficient language modelling who will label a comb "the hair brushing thing," which affects their ability to extract meaning from text later on.

Finally, families dealing with ethno-stress issues (such as substance abuse, violence, and addiction) are probably unable to serve as language models and advocates of education for the children. Despite this, I think it is possible to turn such issues around for these families. It is not possible to eliminate their problems overnight, nor can I change many regrettable circumstances; however, I can help them become empowered to help their children, and perhaps themselves as well.

The Organization

The context for this research study is the Campbell River School District on Vancouver Island, employing 357 full-time equivalent teachers and enrolling 7000 students in 24 schools. Of the total student population, 14% are of First Nations ancestry. There are four reserve-based communities within the school district. All of the local bands have Local Education Agreements with the school district. In addition to the status, on-reserve children, there are approximately 700 off-reserve, non-status, and Métis children. The Campbell River District takes pride in its First Nations Education Department. In the accountability agreement document submitted to the Ministry of Education, Superintendent MacRae wrote that the district's "achievement in the areas of early literacy intervention and Aboriginal education are worthy of note" (MacRae, 2002a, ¶ 1).

The First Nations Education Department is headed by a Vice-Principal of First Nations Education who works closely with the FNEAC, and serves as a member of the District Education Leadership Team (DELT). He oversees the many programs offered within the 17 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, 2 high schools and the 4 First Nations Kindergarten settings. His staff includes Kwakwaka'wakw language teachers, English Skills Development teachers, Kindergarten teachers, First Nations Youth Workers, and Educational Assistants, as well as a small support staff.

Review of Organizational Documents

The District Education Leadership Team began its planning by articulating the team's core values and examining the educational research. The results of their efforts have been translated into the *District Education Plan*. The *District Education Plan* has a clear vision statement: "Respect is Fundamental; Collegiality is Essential; Learning is Central" (District Education Leadership Team, 2001, p. 3).

The *District's Education Plan*'s desired outcomes for the students are

- to ensure that our students are literate;
- to ensure that our students are numerate;
- to ensure that our students can work and interact cooperatively;
- to ensure that our students can apply higher-level thinking skills; and
- to ensure that our students can use technology to integrate and enhance their learning. (District Education Leadership Team, 2001, p. 5)

The members of DELT believe that "these outcomes, if achieved, will prepare our students not only for success at school but also for success in the world of work. They will also enable them to become effective and participatory global citizens" (District Education Leadership Team, 2001, p. 5).

A unique opportunity exists for the Campbell River School District to focus on the learning of their First Nations learners. In June of 2000, this district, in partnership with the First Nations Education Advisory Council (FNEAC), entered into an Educational Improvement Agreement. It is one of only three such agreements within the province of British Columbia. The stated purposes of this agreement are:

- to narrow the gap in performance between all First Nations and Métis students and the general school population until parity is reached in all academic areas; and
- to honour and support the histories, cultures and languages of the First Nations whose traditional territories are served by School District No. 72. (First Nations Education Advisory Council, 2000, p. 3)

Funding to the school district for Aboriginal Education programs is contingent upon meeting the goals established. Meeting targeted goals or exceeding them could result in 110-120% funding. However, remaining at the baseline level or lower would result in only 90% funding.

Spring is a season of opportunity and growth. The thoughtful gardener looks for fertile soil in which to plant her seeds. The signing of the AEIA has brought increased attention to the learning needs of the First Nations students in our district. We have had success in the past, claiming the highest Aboriginal graduation rate in the province, but we acknowledge that there is more work to be done in order to achieve parity. The close of this season brings us to the warmth and energy of summer. Our thoughtful gardener needs to use the rich soil, but must also look to the literature to see what can be brought to the project and what can enrich the soil.

SUMMER – LITERATURE REVIEW

Summer wanderings near and far
Cause my mind to be ajar.
Summer sun burns off night's haze;
What's uncovered as I gaze? (Irwin, 1992, ¶ 5)

From the perspective of summer we look to the surrounding literature with an open mind and examine five areas: literacy, oral language development, preschool learners, First Nations, and community education. Each area offers rich landscapes of findings to inform the research question. Just as a plant needs soil, it also needs sun and rain.

Literacy

Examining the literature in this area was key to my research, because I was looking for support in my belief in the importance of oral language development on later literacy success. The study by Dickinson and Tabors (2002) indeed found a link between receptive vocabulary and narrative production abilities in kindergarten and later scores in the fourth grade for comprehension. Other research (Allington, 2001; Boyer, 1995) likewise has found that early reading achievement is a very reliable predictor of later school success.

Research conducted by Braunger and Lewis (1998) examined the close connections between reading, writing, speaking, and listening. All four areas are involved in “literate behaviour.” These authors clearly explained that

> research in the field may focus on one mode of literacy development—for example, reading—but an important lesson of research in reading has been that all forms of language and literacy develop supportively and interactively. Children build upon oral language knowledge and strategies as they learn to read and write; they develop key understandings about reading—especially phonics—through writing, and they extend their writing range through reading. (Braunger & Lewis, 1998, p. 1)

Oral language, then, is the scaffold for future learning. In order to comprehend the text, the reader must be able to construct a mental picture of the text. A lack of vocabulary hinders the reader’s ability to create the mental picture and thereby gain understanding from the text.

The ability to gain understanding from a text is critical. Many children are able to deceive adults into believing that because they are able to “read” the text, they understand what they have read. In her book *I Read It, But I Don’t Get It*, Tovani (2000) labelled this type of reader as a “word caller” (p. 15). These children, she explained, do not understand that the process of reading involves thinking. They lack sufficient strategies to help themselves gain meaning from the text. She pointed out that the students who don't understand what they have read get further and further behind.

Many an adult has said, "He can read well, he just doesn't do well with comprehension." Tovani took this type of statement to task: "What do these [people] think reading is? It startles me when people define a child's reading level by his or her ability to decode words. Reading must be about thinking and constructing meaning. It's much more than pronouncing words" (Tovani, 2000, p. 17).

The National Research Council has published a book entitled *Starting Out Right* (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999), in which they sum up the skills necessary for skilled reading, including the need for a strong preschool language foundation:

> Children who learn to read successfully master the three core elements. They are able to Identify Printed Words using sound spelling connections and have a sight word repertoire. They are able to use pervious knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies to read for Meaning. They read with Fluency; that is, they can identify words swiftly so that what is read is understood and reading itself is enjoyable. Children start to accumulate the skills needed for reading early in life—building a Preschool Language and Literacy Foundation—which include opportunities for children to develop oral language skills, including

> phonological awareness, motivation to read, appreciation for literate forms, print awareness and letter knowledge. (Burns et al., 1999, p. 7)

A booklet entitled *Put Reading First* (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osburn, 2001) reviewed over 100,000 research studies. It was published by the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) and was funded by the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) The purpose was to find the teaching methods that relate to reading success. The writers of this document summed up the purpose and process of comprehension effectively:

> Comprehension is the reason for reading. If readers can read the words but do not understand what they are reading, they are not really reading. As they read, good readers are both purposeful and active.
>
> **Good readers are purposeful.** Good readers have a purpose for reading. They may read to find out how to use a food processor, read a guidebook to gather information about national parks, read a textbook to satisfy the requirements of a course, read a magazine for entertainment, or read a classic novel to experience the pleasures of great literature.
>
> **Good readers are active.** Good readers think actively as they read. To make sense of what they read, good readers engage in a complicated process. Using their experiences and knowledge of the world, their knowledge of vocabulary and language structure, and their knowledge of reading strategies (or plans), good readers make sense of the text and know how to get the most out of it. They know when they have problems

> with understanding and how to resolve these problems as they occur. Research over 30 years has shown that instruction in comprehension can help students understand what they read, remember what they read, and communicate with others about what they read. (Armbruster et al., 2001, p. 48)

First Nations children, like many children of minorities, often do not achieve literacy levels comparable to White children in our schools. Allington (2001) identified the lack of success by minority groups as a disturbing trend in American schools. His findings, I believe, are likewise applicable to First Nations learners. A researcher at the University of Hawaii, Kathryn Au, has studied reading achievement for low-income children of diverse backgrounds (Au & Asam, 1996). She found evidence that the gap in the level of literacy achievement is longstanding. This is troublesome because an increasing number of low-income children from homes of diverse backgrounds will be entering our schools. Au and Asam described their five year study of these students and concluded with the recommendation "that the three components of change (curriculum, assessment, and teacher development) must work together...if the literacy achievement of low-income students of diverse backgrounds is to be improved" (Au & Asam, 1996, p. 220).

While parent education levels and family income can be connected to reading achievement (Allington, 2001), it is incumbent upon the professional teacher to strive for improvement in the literacy levels of all students. Literature-rich environments (Morrow, 1992; Neuman, 1999; Neuman & Celano, 2001) combined with effective, explicit instruction in comprehension strategies are necessary components of a successful literacy instruction program for First Nations (and indeed all) students.

The International Reading Association has produced a document entitled *Making a Difference Means Making It Different* (2000). "Efforts to improve children's reading and writing achievement must begin by recognizing the right of every child to receive the best possible reading instruction" (International Reading Association, 2000, p. 2). With this in mind, the Association has outlined ten principles, to "provide a means for evaluating current policy and classroom practice, and a direction for change where it is necessary" (International Reading Association, 2000, p. 4). They are as follows:

1. Children have a right to appropriate early reading instruction based on their individual needs.
2. Children have a right to reading instruction that builds both the skill and the desire to read increasingly complex materials.
3. Children have a right to well-prepared teachers who keep their skills up to date through effective professional development.
4. Children have a right to access a wide variety of books and other reading material in classroom, school, and community libraries.
5. Children have a right to reading assessment that identifies their strengths

as well as their needs and involves them in making decisions about their own learning.

6. Children who are struggling with reading have a right to receive intensive instruction from professionals specifically prepared to teach reading.
7. Children have a right to reading instruction that involves parents and communities in their academic lives.
8. Children have a right to reading instruction that makes meaningful use of their first language skills.
9. Children have the right to equal access to the technology used for the improvement of reading instruction.
10. Children have a right to classrooms that optimize learning opportunities. (International Reading Association, 2000, pp. 5-14)

Family literacy is a movement to "help families positively influence their children's outcomes with literacy" (Gordon, 2000b, ¶ 3). Attention needs to be turned to the preschool child and his or her family. The foundation for literacy learning begins in the home. In fact, "children's attitudes towards reading are formed long before they ever cross [the school's] doorstep" (Gordon, 2000b, ¶ 18).

Parents are a child's first and most important teacher. Prior experiences with stories, print material, and a positive attitude toward books will have a significant impact on the child's later literacy development. A child's experiences in the home develop these concepts about print and provide a knowledge base for children. “The individual differences in knowledge about literacy are multiplied when we consider the further differences in knowledge about the world that the reader must bring to the reading and comprehension of texts” (Clay, 2001, p. 116). Therefore, these early experiences provide a knowledge base, both in vocabulary and in the outside world, for the comprehension of stories children will encounter in school.

> Language problems may not be specifically identified until about the fourth grade, where the higher-level aspects—those that depend more on enriched experience—are called on.... Problems with language understanding and usage become increasingly evident as children move into grades that have traditionally demanded higher-level thinking and organizational skills, comprehension of harder books, and increased amounts of writing. Reading test scores plummet. (Healy, 1990, pp. 99-100)

On a cautionary note, Auerbach (1995) pointed out that there is more at play in a child’s success with literacy than the home context. It is possible to come from a home that does not appear to be conducive to literacy learning and still have success. Likewise, it is possible to come from a home with lots of literacy materials and support, yet struggle with reading. The school context that values literacy can turn this around for some students: “The availability of a wide variety of reading materials, the amount and nature of writing, the use of the library, and the quality of instruction, account for the acquisition of literacy as much as the home factors" (Auerbach, 1995, p. 20).

School and home play a vital role in a child's journey to literacy. There may be times when we need to help families understand the value in their seemingly simple acts: reading a story, writing a note, singing a song. We likewise need to be vigilant that we are creating learning environments that promote literacy and foster a love of books, for if children love them they will want to read them. The children in our classrooms today deserve the gift of literacy. This gift needs to come from both the school and the home.

Oral Language Development

Language is necessary to participate fully in society.

> Language is everywhere. It is everywhere we live and work; and it will be everywhere our children live and work, too. There is almost nothing we or our children do in this world that does not involve some type of communication. It is one of the most important life skills our children can acquire. (Schwartz & Miller, 1996, p. 1)

As children work towards goals of literacy, "oral language is both a resource and a beneficiary" (Clay, 2001, p. 95).

Oral language is both receptive and expressive. I compare receptive and expressive language to catching and throwing a ball, respectively. If you spend all your time catching a ball (receptive) and never throwing it back, you will not be as effective at throwing a ball (expressive). Another simple metaphor is a caution to parents and teachers: just because you have thrown the ball, you cannot assume the child has caught it. Many children struggle to comprehend the words that bombard them everyday. It is not possible to know what they know unless we engage them in a conversation.

It is through conversations with adults and stories that children acquire vocabulary.

> For the first five years the child's language growth is entirely dependent on what people say to him [or her]—on how much they speak to him [or her], about what things, in what dialect or language, and in what manner, whether gentle and explaining or peremptory and imperative. (Clay, 1991, p. 70)

Children should never feel reluctant to speak, for it is through the attempts at mature language that they gain "control over the expressiveness and complexity of the language" (Clay, 1991, p. 69). Healy (1990) added that the "refinements of language, such as more complex grammar, vocabulary, and social usage, however, don't arrive so easily; they depend on the quality and quantity of interactions in both preschool and elementary years" (p. 89).

The number of exchanges that occur between parent and child affects the rate of language acquisition (Wells, 1981). Examining the role of adults in language development, Wells (1986) added that "a really satisfying conversation needs to go beyond a single exchange. And it is in enabling this to happen that an adult can make perhaps the most important contribution to the child's development" (p. 47). Clay (1998) also explained exchanges with a ball metaphor, with an additional reminder that "it is a collaborative exercise, and if you do not allow your partner to be part of the collaborative exercise, he or she will leave you, physically and attentively. Reciprocity is the key to success" (pp. 16-17).

Teachers and parents need to consider carefully how often we engage in an exchange of conversation with children. I know that since reading about exchanges, I have monitored myself much more closely. I have noticed a disturbing pattern in the interactions with my children at home. They would tell me something, and I would reply with an "Uh-huh," or "That's good." Seldom did I return the conversation and invite elaboration. I now make a conscious effort to stop, turn, and look at my child and invite the conversation. Clay (1998) took this further:

> Teachers and caregivers must talk to particular children one-to-one, more often. Talk to the ones who are least able to talk to you. Talk when the going is hard. Listen when the child wants to talk to you. Reply, and extend the conversation. How many times do the turns go back and forth? Just once, or more than that? (p. 11)

Wells (1985) asserted that it is the responsibility of the adult to establish "a relationship of conversational *reciprocity* with [the child]" (p. 22). He made a similar point about reciprocity in the book *Learning Through Interaction* (1981):

> In learning to communicate the child is also building his [or her] working model of reality: the values he [or she] adopts and the abilities that he [or she] develops to understand and control the world in which he [or she] lives will owe much to those aspects of experience and interpersonal collaboration that are given salience in his [or her] day-by-day conversational interactions. (p. 115)

Clay (2001) explained that in order "to speak we must bring different kinds of information, different mental activities, and different choices together as we put thoughts into words" (p. 101). The ability to control the world in which the child lives is demonstrated through his or her use of language. "A rich vocabulary is the foundation, but the ability to describe, compare, and categorize with language is what leads to our ability to think in analogy—that's the highest level" (Healy, 1990, p. 109).

Language, then, plays a central role in thought. Owens (1992) said that language is "multifunctional, serving as a social-interactive tool and also as an abstract representation for internal logical reasoning" (p. 138). The inability to control the world of language manifests itself as a lack of understanding:

> Children with insufficient language skills have difficulty requesting information or analyzing problems because they can't formulate appropriate questions. They register overall confusion ("I don't understand"), but lack the verbal tools to analyze the problem; they often remain silent because they can't get their curiosity into words. Their learning suffers accordingly, particularly in subjects such as math and science, where asking the right question is often as important as getting the right answer. In order to analyze problems and evaluate alternatives, children need active practice asking and attempting to answer their own questions. (Healy, 1990, p. 96)

The temptation to over-stimulate children in an attempt to foster language development can be great. Healy (1990) stated, "Many parents today try hard to provide elaborate 'stimulating' environments for their children, but not even designer toys substitute for good quality conversation" (p. 91). Diamond and Hopson (1998) noted that

> if progressing normally, a preschool child doesn't need special language lessons in order to learn to speak fluently and develop normally. He or she just needs an extension of the same rich language environment required as a toddler—to hear a daily diet of conversations, songs, rhymes, and to be listened and responded to when speaking. (p. 174)

This exposure to language, sounds, words, and grammar is "sculpting the brain by preferentially reinforcing connections within and between certain neural circuits, mainly in the left hemisphere" (Diamond & Hopson,1998, p. 173).

Burns et al. (1999) have explained the importance of oral language development in the simplest terms:

> Vocabulary, language skills, and knowledge about the world are acquired during interesting conversations with responsive adults. Talking about books, about daily happenings, about what happened at day care or at work not only contributes to children's vocabularies, but also increases their ability to understand stories and explanations and their understanding of how things work—all skills that will be important in early reading. (p. 8)

Healy (1990) would add an important piece to this:

> Without being melodramatic, I think it would be very important to tell parents they are participating in the physical development of their youngsters' brains to the exact degree that they interact with them, communicate with them. Language interaction is actually building tissue in their brains—so it's also helping build youngsters' futures. (p. 131)

Preschool Years and Language Development

The province of Ontario commissioned a study examining the period of early childhood to examine the best ways to prepare its young children for academic, social, and employment success. At this point in time, the report concluded, there is a choice about how the money can be spent:

> We can turn away from this challenge and hope that our helping systems (the schools, social and health services) will be able to cope, even though they are telling us they are having increasing difficulty meeting the demand. We can hope that children will "grow out of" behaviour and learning problems that were set in early life, even though evidence suggests that many of them will have great difficulty doing so and will not reach their full potential. Or we can put more money into policing and correctional systems and other special services, although this will be expensive and unlikely to make a big difference. (McCain & Mustard, 1999, pp. 2-3)

The authors challenged the government re-envision the future. Instead of turning away from the challenge,

> we can take a major leap into the future, just as we did when we had the chance to provide safe water and immunize all children against disease....When science provided us with the tools...we used them....We have new knowledge today. We must seize the opportunity to use that knowledge to benefit all children. (McCain & Mustard, 1999, pp. 3).

The government answered this call to arms by allocating millions of dollars to early childhood education, in order to put its children, and society, on a "firmer foundation for the future" (McCain & Mustard, 1999, p. 2). During the 2001-2002 fiscal year, Ontario spent $114 million on early childhood education. That amount has increased to $153 million for the year 2002-2003.

The opportunity to "grow" a preschooler's brain is exciting. New knowledge (over the last fifteen years) in the area of neuroscience has changed the way we look at a preschool child's brain. Previously it was believed that the "architecture of the brain was pretty well set at birth" (McCain & Mustard, 1999, p. 26). It remains true that in utero development plays a part in brain growth, yet we now better understand the role of sensory stimulation in the structure and function of the brain during the preschool years. "Human development is not a matter of nature versus nurture, but rather the interplay of nature and nurture together" (McCain & Mustard, 1999, p. 26).

Each interaction with a child is an opportunity to affect brain growth.

> The nerve cell, or neuron, resembles a miniature tree with its cell body, its axon bearing a few long thin extensions, its luxuriantly branching dendrites, and its thornlike spines that grow, change shape, or shrink as a person experiences the world. (Diamond & Hopson, 1998, p. 21)

The dendrites resemble little trees and “neurons without branching dendrites would be like trees without leaves to soak up sunshine” (Diamond & Hopson, 1998, p. 22).

Picturing the dendrites, like trees, stretching and growing, seeking light, is a metaphor that parents and teachers of preschoolers should be able to connect with. Diamond and Hopson (1998) called the image “seductive: miniature trees of the mind growing like poplars in the sun, reaching ever wider and higher to bask in a shower of information—sensations, physical challenges, social contacts—from the outside world” (p. 25).

The critical period for language development is during the preschool years. There is a large growth in language knowledge between the ages of three and five. Diamond and Hopson (1998) stated that

> brain-wave measurements by EEG [electroencephalogram] show a dramatic upsurge of activity between ages three and four in two major language regions: Broca’s area, which governs speech production, and Wernicke’s area, central to understanding speech. This brain-wave activity is reflected in the preschooler’s snowballing vocabulary—about 900 words at age three, growing to 2,500 to 3,000 before the fifth birthday. (p. 154)

Clay (1998) asserted that this language growth, between three and five years, is “related to the amount of conversation that occurs between child and adult” (p.

8). A peer is not able to produce this amount of growth because other children are not able to serve as language role models. A mother will respond with the correct phrase in her answer—serving as a language model; a peer will simply answer the question (Clay, 1998).

Peers, toys, or interesting activities will not necessarily improve the preschooler's language development. Clay (1991) stated,

> Strangely enough, the provision of stimulating preschool environments does not necessarily boost language learning. Interesting play and work activities may be of great value in themselves and still not produce much language behaviour. We need to ask, "Does the play activity bring the child into conversational exchange with a mature speaker of the language?" (p. 72)

The amount of time preschoolers spend viewing television reduces the amount of time they are engaged in conversations, play, and other interactive activities. "Many children now use a familiar videotape as a sort of security blanket with which to relax" (Healy, 1990, p. 196). The average preschooler is viewing 28 hours of television a week (Healy, 1990). "Programs replace family conversation that builds language and listening skills, reading aloud, and games and activities in which adults show children how to solve problems, talk out future plans, or deal with their own emotions" (Healy, 1990, p. 196).

Second only to conversations, books are an important part of the child's language development. In the book *Read to Me: Raising Kids Who Love to Read,* Cullinan (2000) made an important point that a child's request to be read to "is more than a request for attention; it's an opportunity to expand a child's mind" (p. 7). Cullinan (2000) went on to say that

> reading to your child provides a valuable educational advantage; there's no better way to achieve it. Children who are read to do far better in school than those who are not. Children are sponges. They soak up everything they see and hear. When they hear stories they love, they remember endless details and learn things we are not even aware they are learning. (p. 27)

Researchers at the University of North Carolina sought to break the cycle of disadvantage by beginning an enrichment program in infancy, continuing through the preschool years, and then providing some support in elementary school (as cited in Diamond & Hopson, 1998). Following thirty years of this work, a list of the "daily essentials" for preschoolers was complied: "Adults must encourage children to explore; show them basic skills; praise their accomplishments; help them practice and expand their skills; protect them from disapproval, teasing, or punishment; and surround them with a 'rich and responsive language environment'" (Diamond & Hopson, 1998, p. 160).

First Nations

This section challenged me the most. Literature was elusive, and very little was as directly relevant as I would have hoped. One article, entitled *Literacy in Aboriginal Education: An Historical Perspective* (Doige, 2001), elated me. I remember feeling that at last I had found something useful, some concrete information. The content of the article challenged me, yet Doige's point of view needs to be taken into consideration. She contended that systems of hieroglyphics should have been given respect as a means of literate behaviour when Aboriginal people were brought into the educational system. Doige asserted that Aboriginal people were (and still are) only considered literate when they were able to read and write in French or English. Doige considered the use of pictographs, petroglyphs, notched sticks and wampum as evidence of a form of writing. She also added that the underlying motivation behind education and communication with Aboriginal people was the "assimilation as individuals into the dominant culture, which was premised on European values and patterns of behaviour" (Barman, Herbert, & McCaskill, as cited by Doige, 2001, p. 120).

The notion of education serving the purpose of assimilation has been one that I wrestled with while considering my role with the parents of the preschoolers. This made the importance of forming a partnership even more significant, for what I seek to do within this project is assist the parents while they help their child/children reach for their educational goals.

So what exactly is Aboriginal education?

> For most Indian students, now as in the past hundred years, Indian education means the education of Indians by non-Indians using non-Indian methods....Far too few Indian students have contact with Indian educators who are attuned to their culture and who can serve as models of educational achievement. (Hampton, 1995, p. 6)

Hampton's (1995) work outlined five phases of Indian education, with level five being Indian education *Sui Generis*, meaning that Indian education is a thing of its own kind. Hampton added that the desire to have Indian education recognized as distinctive

> indicates a legitimate desire of Indian people to be self-defining, to have their ways of life respected, and to teach their children in a manner that enhances the consciousness of being an Indian and a fully participating citizen of Canada or the United States. (Hampton, 1995, p. 10)

In addition to the five phases, Hampton (1995) outlined 12 standards for Indian Education:

1. Spirituality: At its center is respect for the spiritual relationships that exist between all things.
2. Service: Education is to serve the people. Its purpose is not individual advancement or status.

3. Diversity: Education requires self-knowledge and self-respect, without which respect for others is impossible.
4. Culture: Indian cultures have ways of thought, learning, teaching and communicating that are different from, but as valid as, those of white cultures.
5. Tradition: Indian education maintains a continuity with tradition. Our traditions define and preserve us.
6. Respect: Indian education demands relationships of personal respect.
7. History: Indian education has a sense of history and does not avoid the hard facts of the conquest of America.
8. Relentlessness: Indian education is relentless in its battle for Indian children....We are as relentless as seeds breaking through concrete.
9. Vitality: Indian education recognizes and nourishes the powerful pattern of life that lies hidden within personal and tribal suffering and oppression.
10. Conflict: Indian education recognizes the conflict, tensions, and struggle between itself and White education as with education in general.
11. Place: Indian education recognizes the importance of an Indian sense of place, land, and territory.
12. Transformation: Indian education recognizes the need for transformation in relations between Indian and White as well as in the individual and society. (Hampton, 1995, pp. 19-46)

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples stated that

> equipping successive generations with the skills to participate in a global economy is a major goal of the Aboriginal people and their educators, but it is only part of the story. Aboriginal people are determined to sustain their cultures and identities, and they see education as a major means of preparing their children to perceive the world through Aboriginal eyes and live in it as Aboriginal human beings. Aboriginal education therefore must be rooted in Aboriginal cultures and community realities. It must reinforce Aboriginal identity, and instil traditional values, and affirm the validity of Aboriginal knowledge and ways of learning. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, pp. 561-562)

To understand where Aboriginal education is headed, we must fully understand its past. The residential schooling system within the province of British Columbia removed children from their homes; "parents and grandparents in reserve communities were legally compelled to turn their children over to the custody of residential school authorities. Children were beaten for speaking their own language, and Aboriginal beliefs were labeled 'pagan'" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 435).

In partnership with various religious organizations (United, Anglican, and Roman Catholic) the federal government operated 19 schools within the province between 1861 and 1984 (Provincial Residential School Project, n.d.). In one disturbing account, the Department of Indian Affairs felt that

> to educate [Aboriginal] children above the possibilities of their station, and to create a distaste for what is certain to be their environment in life, would not only be a waste of time but [would be] doing them an injury instead of conferring a benefit upon them. (Barman, as cited by the Provincial Residential School Project, n.d., p. 2)

Many children at these schools experienced physical and sexual abuse, hunger, and hard labour. The intergenerational effects of this horrible experience continue to be felt today (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

So how are we doing today? We are doing better, but this is still not good enough. This is the fundamental reason for the need to partner with the parents. We need to include the parents in their children's educational future. We need to hear and respect their voices as they seek an education for their children that enhances their pride in themselves and their culture as well as in their academics.

The number of Aboriginal graduates (Dogwood certificates) is rising, but parity with the general school population has not been reached. In the 1991-1992 school year, there were 611 Aboriginal graduates in BC; in 2000-2001 there were 1372 Aboriginal graduates (BC Ministry of Education, 2001a). Currently there are six Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements in the province of BC (known in our district as Aboriginal Improvement Agreements), and it is expected that by the year 2005 all 60 school districts will have Enhancement Agreements. Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements are a step in the right direction, because they represent school districts and Aboriginal communities coming together to collaborate on shared goals and strategies to improve Aboriginal student achievement. Unfortunately, the numbers of children referred to special education who are of Aboriginal ancestry are over-represented in all categories except the gifted category (BC Ministry of Education, 2001b). These numbers are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Percentage of Students Enrolled in Special Education in BC, 2001 - 2002

Type of Special Education	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal
Behaviour	9.4%	2.6%
Severe	4.5%	2.3%
Other	5.4%	2.2%
Gifted	0.7%	3.0%

The high percentage (19.3%) of aboriginal children in designated categories of special education is troublesome, because of the potential for the designation to have negative implications on the children's academic self-esteem. Dr. Mel Levine, in his book *A Mind at a Time* (2002) asserted that "a child's educational track record profoundly affects motivation….[Kids] who have failed over and over in the past, may be sapped of motivation and sink even further into failure" (p. 42).

Kehoe and Echols (1994) felt that "one of the most serious concerns of educators today is the lack of success with urban native students" (p. 62). The work of Kanu (2002) sought to identify factors that were inhibiting the school performance of a group of urban high school students. The students identified that the "talk approach" (Kanu, 2002, ¶ 61) of school instruction interfered with their learning:

> It appears that although oral instruction methods such as storytelling are an important cultural approach to learning for these students, the verbal saturation that characterizes much of school instruction, especially when this instruction is fast-paced and delivered in a different language, is not conducive to academic success for them. (Kanu, 2002, ¶ 64)

Students in this study also identified a lack of support and a feeling of being put on the spot. The words of Kanu's research participants addressed these issues:

- "It's like they are looking out for the mistakes you make, and they pounce on you" (Kanu, 2002, ¶ 67).
- "I prefer to remain silent here in class.... It's just that I don't really know and trust the people here. At home in my community, I know and trust people, so I just blabber along without fear of making mistakes or being criticized. But when school starts, I don't talk, period, so they leave me alone" (Kanu, 2002, ¶ 72).

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) stated that the "human cost of this failure is immense. It saps the creative potential of individuals, communities and nations" (p. 434). "We must ask why schooling has continued to be such an alienating experience for Aboriginal children and youth" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 440). Tice (1991) came to a conclusion worth noting here: "Wherever [First Nations] children are present, the success of school in meeting their developmental needs and tasks probably offers a litmus test to serve overall evaluation of school systems" (¶ 2).

Hampton (1995) spoke strongly about how the schools are doing:

> For the vast majority of Indian students, far from being an opportunity, education is a critical filter indeed, filtering out hope and self-esteem....The failure of non-Native education of Natives can be read as the success of native resistance to cultural, spirtual, and psychological genocide. For whatever reason, whoever is to blame, Indian education defined as non-Indian education of Indians has a long and conclusive history of failure. Fortunately, other meanings are possible. (p. 7)

Further, "education as they experience it is something removed and separate from their everyday world, their hopes and dreams" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 482). Additionally, grades nine and ten prove to have the highest drop-out rates, because "at this vulnerable age when there is intense social pressures, youth in public schools frequently encounter racist attitudes and behaviours that undermine their self-esteem" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 485).

Why are students dropping out? The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) stated that

> By the time they enter high school, many Aboriginal youth have spent eight years or more in an education system from which they and their parents feel alienated. In public schools, the absence of support for Aboriginal identities is overwhelming; no Aboriginal high school teacher; only a limited curriculum dealing with contemporary Aboriginal languages, culture, history and political issues; an emphasis on intellectual cognitive achievement at the expense of spiritual, social and physical development; and the marginalization of youth in decision-making about their education. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 476)

Mackay and Myles (1995) interviewed more than 300 people in an attempt to identify factors that contribute to the high drop-out rate of Aboriginal students. They identified three themes—language skills, parental support, and home-school communication—as contributing factors. Kehoe and Echols (1994) found it "significant that 60% of the drop-outs were at least one year behind their age cohort when they withdrew. Drop-out rates do seem to be related to achievement and low achievement begins very quickly" (p. 64). Mackay and Myles further asserted that it is too easy for educators to dismiss the students' lack of success as the fault of the home. Educators' beliefs that homes which value graduation will produce graduates must "enormously comfort educators, because it places the responsibilities for a student's behaviour firmly with the parent and releases the school system from both blame and remedial action" (Mackay & Myles, 1995, p. 166).

Swisher and Hoisch (1992) reviewed a number of American drop-out studies. In one study of Sioux boys who dropped out of school before the ninth grade, "rarely did the young men mention trouble with studies, but about half found school a lonely place or unbearable for other reasons" (Swisher & Hoisch, 1992, p. 11). Another study they reviewed, from the state of Montana, found three themes: teacher–student relationships, content of curriculum, and parental support. Yet another study found that students left because of

> [problems at home, difficulties with classes], followed by teachers not providing enough assistance with student work, difficulty reading, lack of parental encouragement, teachers not caring, work needs at home or job, distance from school, which was tied with school not being perceived as important to life, having disagreements at school with teachers, which was tied with feeling unwanted at school, pregnancy, and finally school being perceived as unimportant to students. (Deyhle, as cited by Swisher & Hoisch, 1992, p. 13)

When Aboriginal students begin to experience isolation, racism, disappointment, and academic self-doubt, the slide down to dropping out begins. "Deficiencies in reading and writing skills have additional repercussions. Students may avoid submitting homework for fear that it will be graded poorly or even rejected outright" (Mackay & Myles, 1995, p. 164). Incomplete homework and skipped classes lead to students sliding further and further behind. Eventually, "they find themselves sucked into a vortex from which the only escape is opting out" (Mackay & Myles, 1995, p. 165).

It is important to remember these opinions and findings as we look to the future for our Aboriginal children. The Improvement Agreement signed within our district paints the picture of promise. By addressing academic, cultural, and language values, the school district seeks to help students succeed while maintaining their ties to their culture. Graveline (2002) wrote of an *exemplary* education for First Nations learners. She intentionally wrote in an alternative form in order to challenge the reader:

> Exemplary Indigenous education
> requires change for ourselves
> for our families
> for our communities
> in relationship to Earth Mother.
> We want change in the systems,
> in educational models currently in place.

We want to change the world.
How can our Visions become a reality?
Recognize that teaching and learning is a process
a transformational cycle.
An exemplary Indigenous educational practice
Is also a healing one.
Power with Not power over
Revitalization Not acculturation
will help us move
into a more hopeful Future
will create
a greater Circle of interconnectedness.
Will contribute
to a healthier
happier future for us All.
(Graveline, 2002, p. 21)

In the introduction to the book *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds*, Battiste recalled an elder admonishing an audience, "We cannot change the past, but we can change tomorrow by what we do today. We all have a responsibility to bring balance and harmony to the children of the earth" (Battiste & Barman, 1995, p. xiv). Part of this balance and harmony is helping these children to graduate from high school with a sense of their Aboriginal identity in addition to the academic skills to be successful in today's economy. This project is also about helping the families who have participated to find harmony and balance as their children's oral language development helps them to experience gains and successes with their academic performance. In the end, I hope it can be said that my work has made a small contribution towards a healthier, happier future in the lives of my students and their parents.

Mackay and Myles (1995) have cautioned that although it is

> unwise to use graduation rates as the sole measure of intellectual vitality of Canada's Aboriginal youth, or the ability of provincial secondary schools to educate them, graduation is important since it is the principal gateway to further education, university degrees and the professions. (pp. 157-158)

So how do we get there from here? We need to foster Aboriginal children's self-esteem; let them know that they belong in our schools and that we will help them to succeed. Pediatrician Mel Levine works with children struggling with learning disabilities (I prefer to call them "learning differences"), and he wrote that these children "have come to equate education with humiliation" (Levine, 2002, p. 14). The central message in his book is that every child, without exception, has strengths. In an interview on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, he stated that "success is like a vitamin, and if you don't get enough of it when you are growing up, you suffer a severe deficiency that could have long-term impacts in your life" (Atkinson Hudson, 2002).

When children arrive in classrooms, they may not yet be ready to participate in classroom activities. “It is not that they come to school ill-prepared or culturally deprived, but rather that they simply have not had some or even many of the same experiences as mainstream classmates” (Pransky & Bailey, 2003, pp. 373-374). Educators need to scaffold learning experiences so that these children are set up for success, because when they are in an environment that “is rich in love, intellectual stimulation and security, the capacity to grow is invigorated” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 447).

This research has confirmed for me that improvement in the education of Aboriginal students needs to come from the classroom practitioners as well as the students and their families. A factor that an educator can control in establishing a caring environment is communication style. The research participants in Kanu’s (2002) work stated that they preferred temporary support, direct guidance, detailed and slow explanations, and numerous examples. One interaction pattern that is frequently used by teachers and that can become confusing for minority learners is the use of indirect statements (“Is this where your pencil goes?”) rather than direct statements (“Can you put the pencil back in the drawer?”). Kanu felt that Aboriginal families tend to favour the direct statements, and gave an example from one of her interviews: “[My parents] tell me directly what they expect me to do; they do not leave it up to me to figure out what they mean” (Kanu, 2002, ¶ 86).

Kanu (2002) went on further to point out that

> a mismatch between a child's linguistic culture and that of the teacher and the classroom can adversely affect learning and academic achievement. Clarity is important to school success because students are judged by what they produce in class and on tests. (¶ 87)

It has also been found that "teachers, Native or non-Native, who used appropriate pace, flow and space had higher levels of participation than those who used inappropriate pace, flow and space" (Collier, as cited by Kehoe & Echols, 1994, pp. 71-72).

Another important consideration of the caring teacher in the creation of the learning environment for First Nations learners is the awareness of racism. Most of the wonderful teachers I work with find it hard to believe that racism is an issue in their school. I suggest that if teachers could get the children to open up, they might be surprised to know the number of times they have endured racist comments or attitudes. As the mother of bi-racial children, this has been a hard issue for me. How does the school support the child who reports incidents of racism? In my experience, there is room for improvement here. When my stepson summoned up the courage to tell his teachers he was being harassed at the high school, he was told that they had no proof of the incidents. Needlless to say, he did not turn to the school again for support.

A classroom-based educator may feel overwhelmed and unable to make system-wide changes, but that teacher is able to make daily decisions about how to interact with students and establish the tone for his or her classroom. Sterling (1995) wrote, "As educators we may not have the option to overhaul the educational system, or to change society's philosophy of self-concept, but we can...choose a teaching style which is genuine, respectful and empathetic" (p. 122). This does make a difference. Research has found that the students of "highly facilitating teachers missed fewer days, had increased self-concept, made greater academic gains, presented fewer discipline problems, committed less vandalism, increased scores on IQ tests, made gains in creativity scores, were more spontaneous, and used higher levels of thinking" (Grigg, as cited by Sterling, 1995, p. 121).

Sterling (1995), a doctoral student, has learned important lessons from her mom, which she is transforming into pedagogy practice. She told her mom that she noticed children respond differently to different teachers and teaching styles, and they seem to learn more when the teacher likes them. Her article reflects on the story her mother told her after that observation. This story illustrates two opposite teaching styles. One grandmother was a master basket maker and craftswoman. She did not want the children to touch her tools, and she frequently scolded the children if they were near her baskets. The second grandmother was an herbalist. She was a kind woman who took her grandchildren into the woods; she laughed a lot. She explained things to the children as they went; she was a storyteller.

In typical First Nations style, the lesson to be taken from this story is left up to the listener. The caring grandmother was able to produce long lasting learning; as it happens, Sterling's mother is an herbalist who tells great stories—but her mother does not know how to weave a basket. Therefore, Sterling concluded that her observations about caring teachers improving the learning conditions for the students must be correct and significant. This confirmation of her observations has influenced her teaching practice as well as her doctoral research.

Sterling noted that the second grandmother has much in common with the humanistic pedagogical discipline. The humanistic educator is a facilitator who works to create a climate of trust and acceptance in an environment where children are free to experiment and learn. This humanistic perspective values three attitudinal qualities that enhance the educator's ability to work effectively with students:

1) Realness or genuiness: They must be capable of accurately and openly communicating their feelings to their students; they are being themselves.
2) Respect: Humanists believe that the second most important characteristic of effective teachers is a profound and deeply felt

> respect for each student; each is seen as a unique human being who has worth in his or her own right; this respect is unconditional.
>
> 3) Empathetic understanding: the ability to understand student reactions from the inside....The teacher must be able to view the world through the student's eyes in order to understand his or her feelings and perceptions without analyzing or judging. (Winzer & Grigg, as cited by Sterling, 1995, p. 120)

In traditional learning experiences, "children learn skills through experience with adults, not by having adults tell them what to do in recipe-book or instruction-manual fashion" (Leavitt, 1995, p. 132). The Royal Commission for Aboriginal Peoples (1996) noted, "From an early age, playing at the edge of adult work and social activities, they learned that dreams, visions and legends were as important to learning as practical instruction in how to build a boat or tan a hide" (p. 448).

In the book *Our Chiefs and Elders*, Neel (1992) interviewed native leaders. As I skimmed through the book, I paused when I saw a picture of my husband's great-grandmother, Agnes Alfred. Known to our family as Granny Axu, I stopped to read her story. In her words I found my own message: "Today's children, you should gather them together and tell them, tell them what is right. Tell them what our elders used to tell us. Tell them the correct way to do things, talk to them" (Alfred, as cited by Neel, 1992, p. 30).

Community Education

The opportunity to work and learn with this First Nations community brings the benefit of reciprocal learning. Therefore, for the purpose of this project, community education means working together as partners in order to co-create understanding. Knowledge will flow both ways. The parents will be able to share their perceptions and experiences with learning and formal education. I will be able to share culturally appropriate strategies for preparing their children for future learning success. As Gordon noted, "Working with families is the most effective way of raising literacy levels. By doing this we prepare rather than repair" (Gordon, 2000b, p. 1).

McGivney (2000) felt that there is a need to work with people in their own communities. She labelled this type of community education as *outreach* (¶ 4). This work requires the investment of time, resources, and trust-building. She cautioned that it is possible to connect this type of community education with the theme of deprivation and a means of doing good for "needy" people. Conversely, this work can be seen "as a means of empowering people by giving them opportunities to negotiate, plan and control the kinds of learning activities that are of most relevance to them. This interpretation puts learners at the center" (McGivney, 2000, ¶ 5).

Another important cautionary consideration offered by McGivney is the "paradox that funders often expect long-term results from short-term funding" (McGivney, 2000, ¶ 16).The work done by the Harvard Family Research Project (1993), *Building Villages to Raise Our Children*, discussed community outreach at length. These researchers explained that the process of community outreach has three phases: recruiting parents, sustaining participation, and "preparing families to graduate as empowered community members" (Harvard Family Research Project, 1993, p. 2). Corrigan (2000) stated, "The primary job of service providers is to create the conditions for change. Their primary goal is to enable families to act on their own behalf" (p. 179).

The community education partnership is a way to return to a traditional source of learning—the power of stories. For thousands of years, First Nations people have used their stories to pass on their wisdom and experience. Stories are a source of knowledge and pleasure for all. They enhance intellect, spark the imagination, and can be used to pass on one's cultural heritage. By capitalizing on this traditional method of learning, we can prepare the preschoolers for formal instruction in reading and writing and lay the foundation for academic success.

When engaged in a community education partnership, there is a fine line between imposing and empowering. Articles (Greymorning, 2000) have addressed the attempts to enforce change upon the First Nations peoples and "mould" them into the Anglo–European culture-assimilation. The Aboriginal people have long been subjected to attempts by authorities to use education to control and assimilate them (Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Therefore, the relationship-building process needs to address the motives and intentions of the community education project.

The opportunity to dialogue during the community education process allows the parents to feel supported: "The process of empowerment must be carried out in a way that helps participants believe in themselves, their knowledge, and their ability to know what it is they want and the actions needed to bring that about" (Harvard Family Research Project, 1993, p. 30). By empowering the parents, community educators provide them with the opportunity to prepare their children for successful learning.

One community-based education program, Roots of Empathy, is a classroom-based parenting course. Fundamental in this program is dealing with the parents with kindness, compassion, and empathy. "Part of the supporting parenting capacity is to teach parents the things they need to know so they can maximize their children's opportunities to reach optimal development with literacy and life" (Gordon, 2000a, ¶ 3). Other programs (Lovelady, 1992) likewise respect the parents and recognize that the school needs to work with the community to improve the educational system.

Fournier and Crey (1997) felt that "today a strong young [First Nations] generation is struggling to emerge from the dark colonial days into the bright hope" (p. 205). In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples wrote that today's youth "straddle two worlds. The non-Aboriginal world has become a fast-paced, competitive, changing environment in which ever higher levels of education and new skills are required to survive" (p. 475). The Royal Commission added that this generation is also suffering from the intergenerational effects of the attempts of the residential schools to erase aboriginal identity. "The family dysfunction of today is a legacy of disrupted relationships in the past, but the effects are broader and more diffuse than can be traced in a direct cause-and-effect relationship" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 36).

Grand Chief Joe Miskokomom is quoted in the Royal Commission's report:

> We believe our children are our future, the leaders of tomorrow. If you believe in that, then you have to believe also that you must equip your future with the best possible tools to lead your community and lead your nation into the twenty-first century. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 23)

In order for the school system to work with First Nations' people and prepare these children to be the leaders of tomorrow, we must respect parents and work with them to raise the educational levels of their children. The parents are trusting the school system with their most precious gifts—their children—and we need to remember and respect this. They hope for an educational system that will develop these children academically and foster a pride for their culture. In supporting the families, we are indeed empowering them to maximize their children's opportunities with literacy and life.

Irwin's poem at the beginning of this chapter is particularly meaningful to me. What was *uncovered for me as I gazed* at the season of summer was confirmation. Oral language is the scaffold for future reading success. *Summer wanderings near and far* brought me into contact with an abundance of information. The farmer tends to his fields in the summer so that they will be prepared for the fall harvest. I spent time in the literature, with my *mind ajar*, so that I would be prepared to interact with the parents during my data collection in the fall phase of my project.

FALL – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Why is it that so many of us persist in
thinking that autumn is a sad season?
Nature has merely fallen asleep, and her
dreams must be beautiful if we are to
judge by her countenance.
(Coleridge, as cited by MacRae, 2002b, p. 1)

As the season of fall progressed, it became time to write. Writing an academic paper filled me with apprehension. I did not want to produce a document that was of little or no interest to others. Remembering that participatory action research seeks to present the findings in a manner that is accessible, I set out to write. Yet, I questioned myself: "Research is for experts, and if I am enjoying myself, is it really research?" Words of reassurance were found within Kirby and McKenna (1989), where they wrote,

> If you can increase the understanding of an issue or a circumstance, illuminate one experience, portray one person's story in a new light, you will have helped others to understand the social world a little better. *This* is what research is all about. (p. 96)

Action research is a cyclical process with participation as a key feature. Action research is a type of inquiry "designed to improve the efficacy of decisions"

(Greer, 2002, p. 1-10). "What is common to almost all models and approaches to action research is a spiral or cycle of steps, each of which is composed of planning and action, followed by the evaluation and reflection on the result of the action" (Greer, 2002, p. 2-9). As with any research, issues of ethics are of paramount consideration. It is essential to conduct the research with integrity and to treat the participants with respect and consideration.

There are a variety of action research models, and therefore I had choices about how best to structure my action research process. One key intended outcome of this project was the active participation of the parents of the First Nations preschoolers; therefore, participatory action research was selected. Participatory action research, as described by Stringer (1996), takes into consideration people's history and culture, and seeks to present the findings in a manner that is "accessible to both professional practitioners and laypersons" (p. 15). Community-based action research appeared to meet the empowerment needs and ethical considerations of the First Nations people I hoped to work with. "By including people in decisions about the programs and services that serve them, practitioners extend their knowledge base considerably and mobilize the resources of the community....[That has] the potential to alleviate many interconnected problems" (Stringer, 1996, p. 37).

By employing the role of resource person/facilitator, I hoped to decrease any negative reactions to an "authoritarian process." First Nations people have lived under oppressive conditions for too long, and it was vital that I find a way to work *with* the parent volunteers. This would "mobilize their energy, engage their enthusiasm and generate activity which can be productively applied to the resolution of issues and problems that concern them" (Stringer, 1996, p. 25). Wadsworth (1998) recommended that collaborative researchers be

> clear about why they are interested in the research—perhaps describing their own personal experiences that have led to the questions they are wanting to ask. This clarifies the purposes for the other participants, and helps each participant know where the other is "coming from". (p. 11)

Being explicit with the parent volunteers about my motivation, I hoped, would further the relationship-building process.

First Nations communities have lived under oppressive conditions for generations —since the *Indian Act* of 1876. The adverse affects of this continue to be felt in families today. I knew that I had to be open to listening to "the truths of others" (Greer, 2002, p. 5-31); failure to have done so may have prevented me from understanding the issues of my project. The qualitative approach allowed me to listen and use the opinions and experiences of First Nations people. Their perceptions of various factors, including their own school experiences, played a role in the successful outcome of this project. "Qualitative researchers argue that people's perceptions should be the focus of analysis: 'perceptions are real because they are real in their consequences'....We must understand these perceptions if we want to understand human behaviour" (Palys, 1997, p. 35).

Data Gathering Tools

The participants in this study are parents of First Nations preschool-aged children. Stringer (1996) stated, "Participation is most effective when it...deals personally with the people rather than with their representatives or agents" (p. 32). Parents were recruited through the on-reserve preschool, with invitations being sent to two additional parents on the reserve whose children are not yet of age to attend the preschool. The criteria was inclusive: I am a parent of a preschool-aged child.

Eleven such parents live on the reserve, and nine agreed to participate. However, only eight completed the study. All but one have a partner or spouse. The number of children in the households range from two to four. Two parents are employed, one is attending school, and the remaining five are stay-at-home caregivers. The group included three fathers and five mothers.

An important aspect of this project was giving voice to the participants. As a people, they have been oppressed and misrepresented repeatedly in research. "Research, which so far has been largely the instrument of dominance and legitimation of power elites, must be brought to serve the interests of dominated, exploited and oppressed groups" (Maria Mies, as cited by Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 15). A second important aspect to this project was the concept of collaboration. "Research from the margins is not research **on** people from the margins, but research **by**, **for** and **with** them" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 28).

Initially, I intended to use only one-on-one interviews and circles as my data-gathering tools. During the process of the study, it became apparent that the needs of the participants would be better met through a questionnaire (rather than a closing circle) to gather their reflective thoughts about the learning journey. The methods I chose for gathering data—the interview, the circle, and the questionnaire—enabled me to gather information not available elsewhere. Palys (1997) said, "Few processes are as fundamental to social science research as the person-to-person exchange of information" (p. 144).

Interviews were appropriate for this project because the information I sought was not readily available in the research literature; the issues around education are sensitive and complex; and interviews allow for a high degree of participation. Interviews are the "best way to gather deep, rich data in the words of the respondent" (Palys, 1997, p. 187). The interview was also an aid in the development of the relationships between the volunteers and myself, and allowed for the possibility of exploring an unexpected direction considered important by the participant.

Each question was open-ended, in order to gather the richness of participant words and thoughts. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and was tape recorded and later transcribed. During the one-on-one interview, I explained the circle process in order to prepare the participants for the next phase of the project. The transcripts were colour-coded by themes that emerged from the interview transcripts and the questionnaire. The list of questions is provided in Appendix A.

The work of Baldwin (1994) grounded my use of the circle as a means of collecting data. As a people, First Nations parents have been ignored in the educational experiences of their children, and I would like to give them back their voice. According to Baldiwn, the circle is a space where we courageously listen to each other, speak our truth, and act with clear intention. The process of thoughtful speaking and listening not only allowed me to hear their voices, but also built a sense of community and relationship amongst the participants as we acknowledged the past and looked to the future.

The circle format was an invitation for the parents to participate. Ground rules were established. Participants were asked to share their stories based on their experiences. Remembering that silence does not need to be filled, I allowed for lapses in dialogue to occur, because silence was an opportunity for the participants to gather their thoughts and gain comfort in speaking aloud.

A questionnaire was used to conclude the process. It was a means of gathering the participants' reflections, thoughts, and suggestions about the learning process involved in this research project. The questionnaires were group-administered (Palys, 1997) and distributed at the end of the second workshop, as this was an opportunity to ensure a high response rate. The questionnaires were anonymous, and I was available to clarify any ambiguity in the questions. The questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix B.

Prior to beginning the project, I had been concerned about the potential problem of illiteracy. However, the interview process clarified for me that this group of parents should be literate (based on their own accounts of their school success). My next concern became the design of a meaningful questionnaire. Palys (1997) stated,

> Designing thoughtful, interesting, and appropriate questions; providing an ethical context in which respondents will be most likely to give insightful and candid responses; and understanding just what we have at the end of the process—all are challenges with which we must be constantly concerned. (p. 145)

At this point, the advice of my advisor, Tammy Dewar, was invaluable. She reminded me to focus again on my question and consider how questions could be asked to gather that data from the participants. Specifically, the question about suggestions for future workshops was an excellent way to tap into parents' opinions of what would make the learning more beneficial.

The concept of partnership within this community education process meant that I needed to monitor the amount of time I spent talking. I needed to provide opportunities for the parents to talk and be comfortable with the silences. The principles of circle—speaking with intention and listening with attention—were important ground rules, and set the stage of the partnership- and relationship-building process. A partnership with the parents founded on interactive conversations began the relationship-building process, so that I was able to sustain participation. By utilizing cultural norms, such as "gatherings" (vs. meetings), food, and incentives, I strived to foster empowerment. "The process of empowerment must be carried out in a way that helps participants believe in themselves, their knowledge and their ability to know what it is they want and the actions needed to bring that about" (Harvard Family Research Project, 1993, p. 30). By empowering the parents, we provide them with the opportunity to prepare their children for successful learning.

Study Conduct

Spring began for this project when my sponsors, John Frishholz and Anne Boyd, signed the letter of agreement. The school district approved the project following the ethical review process at Royal Roads University. I was ready to begin recruiting participants. At the open house for the preschool–kindergarten where I teach, I mentioned my project to all of the parents. The parents were very receptive to the idea and a list of participants was created. Parents from the reserve helped me to identify any additional parents who may be interested in participating, and invitations were sent to two additional parents. I then followed up with these two parents with a phone call. In all, 9 out of 11 parents of preschoolers on the reserve agreed to participate. In the end, one parent withdrew for medical reasons, leaving eight who began and completed the journey with me.

The planned conduct of this study involved four phases. The first would be one-on-one interviews for information sharing and relationship building. Phase two would be a circle gathering to talk about school experiences, which would be followed in phase three by a workshop on school success. Phase four was to be a circle about the learning journey to close the project.

The nature of action research is cyclical and in revisiting the plan, it became apparent that the needs of the parents would be better met through a second workshop. Therefore, the planned circle of stage four was replaced with a second workshop. At the conclusion of this workshop, a questionnaire was distributed to the participants in order to gather their experiences and input about the learning.

In phase one, I met with the parents individually at the school on the reserve. This location was chosen because of its proximity to their homes. It was necessary to be accommodating to their schedules, and I was able to touch base with each of them about their preference for an interview time when they picked their child up from school.

Several parents arrived at the interview nervous. I began by reviewing the research consent form, clearly explaining that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time. The sessions would be tape recorded and the tapes destroyed at the conclusion of the project. Many commented at the end that it was not as bad as they had thought it would be. During the interview, I strived for a conversational and relaxed tone, using open-ended questions which allowed parents to elaborate or extend into areas they thought pertinent. Following the questions, I explained phase two, the circle, and its purpose in the project. All parents agreed with the importance of discussing their school experiences before examining the school experiences of their children.

On the day of the circle, I saw each parent as they picked their child up from school, and confirmed our start time. However, only three of the eight parents arrived for the circle. We began by reviewing ground rules for circles. I had asked each parent to bring an object or photo that would remind them of their child. We placed these into the center of the circle. These objects and photos drew our energy into the circle. Baldwin (1994) said that the "center provides our guidance for holding the energy and refinding direction" (p. 121) and that it "acts as the basket to contain [the] released heart energy" (Baldwin, 1994, p. 124). The parents then shared their school experiences one at a time. Attentive listening and thoughtful speaking characterized their honest dialogue with one another.

As I am not of First Nations ancestry, I decided it was inappropriate to participate in sharing my school experience. Instead, I shared my intentions and hopes with the small circle. Reminding the parents of my family circumstances (as the wife of a First Nations man and a mother to bi-racial children), I explained the concerns that I have about the success of First Nations children at school and my hopes for "our" children to succeed at school. I closed by sharing a verse from a poem by Paula Underwood: "Let us understand that what may be impossible for one may be possible for many" (as cited by Baldwin, 1994, p. i). This verse highlights my hopes that together the parents and I will be able to make a difference in the lives of our children and positively affect their outcomes at school.

During phase three, we met in a small meeting room in the community centre located on the reserve. The intent of this phase was to deliver a workshop for the parents about oral language and its connection to school success. To help create the learning environment, I hired a babysitter to stay with the children in the preschool classroom across the street.

When we concluded, the parents overwhelmingly requested additional workshops on this subject. Their responses necessitated that I revisit my plan and my question. If I seek to determine how best to partner with the parents, then is it not incumbent upon me to respond to their requests for additional learning on this topic? As well, the first circle was not well-attended and therefore, perhaps not a best practice in this situation. I therefore eliminated the closing circle in favour of a second workshop, and, as a means of gathering their input about the learning experience, added a questionnaire.

Study Findings and Conclusions

Once the four phases of the project were completed, I worked with transcripts from the interviews, circle, and workshops, as well as responses to the questionnaires, to look for themes. Each parent was coded by a letter to guarantee anonymity. I then took the transcripts from the interviews and pulled answers to various questions, lining up each response side by side for easier comparison. Similarities readily became apparent, and I have grouped the findings into five main themes:

1. Parent Learning.
2. Behaviour Changes.
3. The Presentation of the Workshops.
4. Recommendations From Parents.
5. Extracurricular Activities.

1. Parent Learning

The majority of these parents have graduated from high school. Six of the eight have their Dogwood certificate, two have a Bachelor of Arts degree, and two have a grade 11 education. When asked of their reading experiences as a child, four said they were read to, and four said they were not. There was no apparent correlation between having been read to as a child and school success for these parents.

Only three of these parents characterized a family member as having been a support person when they were in school. Four would describe another significant adult as having been supportive in their education (someone at the residential school or a First Nations youth worker for the school district). Two parents could name no one who had been supportive of their schooling experiences.

Parents' overall school experiences were negative. Only one reported school having been being a good experience, one felt it had been fair, and the remaining participants characterized school negatively. The negative remarks included such comments as "difficult," "tough," "really tough," "awful," and "uncomfortable."

When asked what their hopes are for their children, responses fell into two broad categories: 1) a good education; and 2) pride in oneself and in the culture. These parents hope that their children will have confidence, enjoy school, think that learning is fun, and develop a "can-do" attitude towards learning. They also wish for them friends, sports, and support while they are learning. They speak specifically of skills associated with reading and writing. The parents' hopes also include an education that is free of shame and racism, that builds the children's self confidence, and that includes more First Nations knowledge and content.

Vandegrift and Greene (1992) explained that parent involvement in the education of their children is difficult, because

> for many parents, school brings back memories of their own failure. Some feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, even guilty when they walk into a school. Others do not feel valued by schools. [There are] feelings of inadequacy, shyness or resentment, longing or fear....Every parent has his or her own story to tell. (p. 57)

Parents were asked on the questionnaire whether they had learned something new that was helpful. Indeed they had, falling into the two broad categories of reading and oral language:

- "I learned techniques for expanding vocabulary. That was exciting."
- "I learned that it is very good to read, listen, and talk to your kids."
- "[I learned] how to extend conversations."
- "Instead of one-time exchanges, [I learned to] keep the conversation going. I learned that talking about what they are doing is very important learning."

Each interaction with a child is an opportunity to affect brain growth (Diamond & Hopson, 1998; Healy, 1990). These parents are now aware of the impact each interaction can have on their child's future success. These exchanges will allow the child to acquire vocabulary, world knowledge, and pre-literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness. Conversations with the child develop vocabulary, but also prepare the child with the ability to use language in other ways, including describing, comparing, categorizing, and formulating questions (Healy, 1990). These conversations also prepare the child to understand stories, explanations (Burns et al., 1999), and new concepts when they arrive at school.

2. Behaviour Changes

A number of parents wrote about specific actions they could take to change their actions at home for the benefit of their child's education. This theme emerged from the data collected despite the fact that no questions were asked about how they could change their behaviour. The connection these parents made to the content in the workshop and the implementation they could make at home happened independently.

One parent poignantly wrote, "I will give my children more time, or should I say invest more time, in my children's learning." Five of the eight parents reported that their family eats dinner with the television on. If these parents change this behaviour, then the result will be more opportunities for conversation. The parent who sums it up the best wrote,

> I learned today to shut the TV off when we are eating [and invite my daughter] to sit at the table with us. I also learned to go and read to her

> when she asks me to. I am going to start a conversation about a book. I also learned how to talk to my daughter.

During the course of the workshops, I was honest with the parents about my new awareness of the importance of conversational exchanges, due to research undertaken for this inquiry, and my struggle to stop television viewing during dinner. I feel that this frank dialogue about catching myself not furthering conversations with my children, and not gaining immediate acceptance of the idea to turn the television off, validated for parents my honesty and created common ground between us. One parent wrote, "I found the information helpful, by acknowledging your child when [he or she] is talking to you, especially when you are very, very busy! And not by just agreeing to what [he or she is] saying." Again, if this one parent increases the number of exchanges between the child and herself, then the child receives the benefit of increased language development from satisfying conversations (Wells, 1986).

3. The Presentation of the Workshops

The parents found the workshops relevant and interesting. One parent wrote on her questionnaire, "I feel that everyone got something on what they can do to help their children learn, in so many ways." Another wrote, "The workshop was very helpful to me because my interests are helping my child to succeed in school." It is evident that these parents, whom many may consider likely to be uninvolved, were interested and attentive during the workshops. One father wrote, simply, “My interests were discussed = my children.” These parents demonstrate that if we rethink our strategies for involving parents, they will involve themselves.

Attending school-sponsored events may not best serve the needs of this group of parents. This project differs from a school-sponsored event, because the school where the workshops were held is not the larger public school, but an on-reserve band school. They were not asked to go to the public school in the evening with 300 other parents. We met on the reserve, in the afternoon, and I was there just for them. In addition to location and timing, other conditions that contributed to the success of the workshops included hiring a babysitter and providing snacks.

The parent comments about the delivery of the workshop included the “straightforward explanations” and the use of overhead slides. One parent commented afterwards that my level of enthusiasm for the subject was contagious. He wrote on his questionnaire that “the workshop was presented with a great amount of knowledge and enthusiasm. [It was] very well presented.” Of particular note was the comment that “she knew her perspective of First Nations and [had] experience—an important aspect.”

Also contributing to the success of the workshops was the presentation of hands-on, low-cost, or no-cost activities that parents could use at home with their children. “[She discussed] my concerns about how to make learning fun and easy." At the end of the second workshop, this parent also wrote that her child "will definitely benefit from this workshop—actually I have noticed a change in her already." Other comments included,

- "I didn't know there are so many ways to help my child learn, to help him achieve his goals."
- "I learned something new today on the different ways to help teach our children in learning, and what tools we can use to make learning more fun, like playing a game together using letters or numbers."
- "[The] resources provided were helpful."

Literature in the area of community education reminds us that working with parents is key to improving literacy levels (Gordon, 2000b). Corrigan (2000) would say that the job of the workshop presenter is to create the conditions of change and enable parents to act on their own. The Harvard Family Research Project (1993) stated that by empowering parents, we help them believe in themselves and in their knowledge, and we help them to know which actions are needed. I believe that this project has met these conditions, and has empowered this group of parents to positively affect their children's school success.

4. Recommendations From Parents

In order to tap into the parental opinions about what other ideas would have made the workshop desirable, they were asked to make recommendations for future workshops. This question was unsettling for the parents; they were unsure how to respond. I suggested that they brainstorm together around the table to get some ideas flowing. I let the parents know that any suggestions they had would be of benefit to me, as I do a number of parent workshops, and that I would be grateful for their input.

The parents appreciated the learning conditions that were established, the babysitter, and the food. Two parents spoke of shorter, single topic sessions. Everyone agreed that it would be useful to have more sessions:

- "I would love to get some more workshops."
- "The one recommendation [I would make] is that they [should] have more workshops."
- "I think [my recommendation] would be to have more workshops on how much fun it can be learning."
- "I think I would like to have more workshops. She has a lot to say and her enthusiasm is wonderful."
- "[I would recommend] more workshops to help parents learn more about how we can help teach our children better."

During the interviews, I asked the parents if cultural experiences were part of their childhood. One said yes, two said somewhat, and five said no. My impression was that there is a developing desire to return to a more traditional way of gathering, in order to re-establish the connection to traditional ways for themselves and their children. One response on the questionnaire confirmed this interpretation, and helped me to realize that the parents desire to know more about each other and to develop their sense of community and oral history:

> [I wish] that people would communicate better on or off the reserve. There is not enough communication with the people on the reserve, because everybody says there is nothing to do on the reserve, and that is because there [are] not enough gatherings for people to communicate together. That's a shame, because everybody considers each other as family.

As I reread my notes from my reflective writings after the interviews and the group sessions, I noticed several places where I had commented upon the interaction between the parents. There were many instances when they asked each other for personal information. This struck me, because it had been my assumption that as a small community, living together on the reserve, they would know more about each other, but they did not. We spent time as a group discussing the oral tradition and recalling childhood memories of experiences with elders. This struck a chord with the parents, and they voiced the opinion that they should be doing more on the reserve to meet together.

5. Extracurricular Activities

An unexpected finding arose from the question about the parents' best school memory. I had asked the question believing that it may shed some light on classroom practices that work for First Nations students. What I found out was that, overwhelmingly, these parents cite an extracurricular activity as their best school memory. Perhaps this is because sports provided the parents with an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging at the school.

Kehoe and Echols (1994) reported that "a sense of belonging to one's school is an important element in a student's effective domain. Students who have dropped out of school frequently say they never felt they were a part of the school" (p. 64). Aside from sports, the other best memories included

- being on the honour role;
- going to university, being around other people excited about learning, and the relevant learning of First Nations studies; and
- being with other Native students at residential school and feeling a sense of belonging (vs. time spent in public school with no other Native children).

The parent who felt her best memory was when she made the honour roll said that she was advised by the school district's First Nations youth worker to ignore the racism she was feeling at the high school, and focus on her school work. "[The youth worker] told me to just ignore everything and just do it, and I got on the honour roll. I kind of felt like, 'Ha, I'm Native and I did it!'" Clearly, this parent was not feeing a sense of belonging at the high school. Her comment speaks to the lowered academic self-esteem many First Nations youth experience (Kehoe & Echols, 1994).

One parent's best school memory, in addition to sports, was a feeling of belonging at the residential school from grades four to nine. In grade nine, he moved and enrolled in a public school. A portion of our interview is provided and reflects his sense of not belonging at the public school:

B: Then, in grade nine, I went to school in Langley. My sister lived there.

Me: How was the school learning stuff?

B: It was challenging, difficult.

Me: Would that be because reading was difficult?

B: No, reading was fine. It was just difficult.

Me: Why do you think that was so?

B: Because in the residential school, [I was] around people [I] knew, but when I went to Langley I didn't know anybody. Not being around familiar faces.

Me: The social stuff affected how you were doing in school?

B: Yes.

Me: So, did it look different when you were in Langley? Were there other First Nations children in the school?

B: No, I was probably the only one there. I felt out of place.

In this group, the above parent is one of the two who did not graduate, which may be a result of his sense of not belonging in the public school. Kehoe and Echols (1994) felt that "developing a greater sense of belonging to the school, on the part of Native children, may be an indirect means of reducing school disaffection and subsequent dropping out" (p. 66).

Study Recommendations

A careful review of the study findings has led to this collection of recommendations. The recommendations will be shared with the Chief and the Council on the reserve, as well as members of the DELT for their consideration. Each recommendation bears significance to the academic success of students in the school, so no attempt has been be made to prioritize this list of recommendations.

1. Foster Self-Esteem and a Sense of Belonging

A goal for both the school district and the First Nations people is to improve school success rates for their children. The school district speaks specifically of Dogwood (graduation) completion rates, and the parents speak of a good education that develops a sense of pride in self and culture. Kehoe and Echols (1994) have found that a sense of belonging to the school reduces drop-out rates.

Sports are one possible way for children to develop a sense of belonging to the school. Kleinfeld (as cited by Kehoe & Echols, 1994) found that teachers who combined close, warm relationships with high expectations obtained higher achievement results with First Nations children. Improving academic self-esteem and a sense of belonging are vital components of school success for our First Nations students. The schools must actively seek out additional ways to foster this sense of belonging, and to improve the academic self-esteem of their First Nations students.

2. Offer Additional Learning Workshops

The parents responded favourably to this workshop format, and requested additional workshops. I feel that it is important to honour them as learners, and have decided to offer an additional series of four workshops. I have secured funding for this, so that I will be able to meet the expenses of handouts, babysitters, food, and take-home materials for the participants.

Parents who joined in this study are now aware of the importance of oral interactions on brain growth and language acquisition. Language development increases from satisfying conversations with adults (Wells, 1986). Follow-up sessions will continue to reinforce and extend the learning that has taken place. This is both respectful and important, because too often funding for projects is short term or one-shot, but is expected to produce long-term gains. A recommendation for both the school district and the band is for the future planning of on-going funding, as a regular part of the yearly budget plan, for such work with parents.

3. Establish Trust and Communicate Honestly

Trust and relationships are important considerations when working with marginalized people. My ability to dialogue with the parents honestly about the challenges they face, instead of speaking down to them, made me real and trustworthy to them. They were aware of my intentions and indeed felt that I cared about them and their children. I would recommend that trust and communication be considered when offering learning opportunities to First Nations parents.

4. Design Learning Opportunities Carefully and Respectfully

The learning environment I created was carefully designed. Attention was placed on best meeting particpant needs. For this reason, the sessions were held on the reserve, in the afternoon, and a babysitter was provided. Parents were comfortable because their children were well-cared for (and fed), and this freed them to engage in the workshop. They appreciated my enthusiasm for the topic, and my solid understanding of the First Nations people and culture. These parents do love and care for their children, and are willing to engage in the learning activities because they want the best for their children. Yet, educators must be aware that school may not have been a positive experience for First Nations parents, and creating new learning conditions may be necessary for some groups of parents.

5. Plan More Community Gatherings

My final recommendation is specifically for the band. The members of the study spoke of a desire for more community gatherings. This would benefit the members of the community in two ways. Firstly, they seek to reconnect to their traditional ways and to each other. What better way to achieve this than by gathering together? Secondly, gathering and sharing in activities and stories will provide meaningful language development opportunities for the young children. The new Chief and Council are planning for new opportunities for their people, especially the young, and will likely feel validated by this finding.

WINTER – RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The birds have gone, the branches are bare, skies are gray,
December is here; it is a quiet month,
There is a privacy about it, you can savour the solitude,
It would seem that the pulse has frozen

All is hushed and solemn,
But
Things are happening, there is magic, beauty, and power in this isolation.
(Laura Sewid, unpublished, 2003)

Research Implications

An Early Start Is Critical

Action research's purpose is to create positive change. Therefore, I chose to effect some change during my project by working directly with a small group of parents. The choice to work with the parents of preschoolers was significant, in that the important period of time for language acquisition is prior to school entry. Therefore, if educators hope to effect change, we need to look at this critical age.

With a funding shortage in education, choices need to be made. I challenge the current spending focus, which deals with current problems, in favour of a more relevant two-pronged approach. We need to work with the children struggling in our schools (remediation), but we also need to be proactive and work with preschool-aged children (prevention). Furthermore, we need to empower the parents to help their own children be successful at school. Failure to do so will result in the status quo: Year after year, First Nations children are referred to special services in the educational system, and year after year the drop-out rate at the secondary level remains high.

Through working with the parents, we can hope to see children arrive in kindergarten who are better prepared to succeed at school. Literature in the area of community education reminds us that working with parents is key to improving literacy levels (Gordon, 2000b). The lack of language skills at the kindergarten level has been found to be predictive of later reading success (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002). Likewise, other researchers (Allington, 2001; Boyer, 1995) have found that early reading achievement is a very reliable predictor of later school success.

Teachers Play an Important Role

A significant implication for the educational system is the importance of the teacher's role. Children need warm and caring teachers, a sense of belonging, and academic self-esteem (Kehoe & Echols, 1994) to improve their chances of success at school. Teachers are the front line workers and the ones in daily contact with the students. Therefore, they are best able to improve these conditions for the First Nations students in their classrooms. Whether it is a primary school-aged child who is having difficulties using oral language, or an intermediate child who is feeling isolated, the time and attention of a caring teacher can make all the difference.

I am reminded of a quote that was given to me years ago as a new teacher:

> I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized. (Ginott, 1975, ¶ 1)

There have been many times in my career when kind words and a hug have done immeasurable good for a defiant, angry child who is more used to receiving a reprimand.

Assumptions May Surround Parent Involvement

Another implication connected to the classroom teacher, and the school as a whole, is the notion of parent involvement. Vandegrift and Greene (1992) have reminded us that, unwittingly, schools may make parents feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, guilty, or unvalued. The school may need to reexamine its definition of an involved parent. School functions may be intimidating for the parent. In such a case, perhaps sending out newsletters or meeting parents on their own ground would be more effective.

Teachers need to consider the demands they are putting on the home. Is it reasonable to expect a single mom with four children to read each night for half an hour with each child? I think not. It would be ideal, but it is unrealistic. In a life that may already be filled with stress and hard-to-meet expectations, schoolwork can become a heavy burden. I also question the expectation of 30 minutes of nightly reading, because the reading activity may itself become a stressful, rushed activity, instead of an activity for pleasure and enjoyment. In the end, is that not what we hope for—children who are able to find pleasure in a book and who want to read?

I have re-examined my expectations for students and their families since having a family of my own. Instead of nightly home reading, I send home a book bag with a collection of stories to be enjoyed during the course of a week. This respects the families, and allows them to sit together to enjoy some or all of the stories when their schedules permit. For the purpose of this research, newsletters with oral language suggestions and take-home materials were used as a way to continue to reinforce the learning that occurred in the workshops.

The Use of Stories Is Valuable

The work of Kanu (2002) found that stories are effective at helping Aboriginal students to understand concepts and messages. “In indigenous Aboriginal culture, traditional stories, legends, songs and many other forms of knowledge are passed on among generations by continual retelling (through stories) by elders and leaders who carry the knowledge of these spoken forms in their memories” (Kanu, 2002, ¶ 50). “First Nations peoples’ stories are shared with the expectation that the listeners will make their own meaning, that they will be challenged to learn something from the stories” (Archibald, as cited by Kanu, 2002, ¶ 55).

At the outset of this project, a goal I set for myself was to create research that was accessible to the community with which I worked. Therefore, I wrote a story that could be shared with parents as an introduction to oral language development and school success (see Appendix C). My story incorporates oral language research with the elements of family, relationships, cultural knowledge, and pride in the oral tradition of the First Nations people. In the spirit of collaboration, I sought help from the participants and my family. The group of parents with whom I worked helped me to brainstorm elements of the story. In particular, one parent told me of her grandmother telling her the reason that we repeat stories is that what it means to us at age four will not be the same as what it means to us later in life. Also, my husband’s brother-in-law, Robert Hemphill, created the art that accompanies the story. Stories have a special way of capturing the attention of listeners and hooking them emotionally. This prepares them for absorbing the message or concept of the story and increases the listeners' ability to remember the lesson delivered.

Professional Development Should Include the Needs of First Nations Learners

The implication from this research for the school district pertains to the creation of opportunities for professional development. The professional development department has consistently offered courses to the teaching staff on the residential school experience in order to create an awareness of this experience. This has been helpful, but more attention needs to be given to the development of teachers' awareness about the needs of their First Nations learners. When the three components of change (curriculum, assessment, and teacher development) work together, it is possible to improve the literacy achievement of children from homes of diverse backgrounds (Au & Asam, 1996).

The work of this action research project also found that a sense of belonging and the academic self-esteem of the learner are crucial. These concepts could be easily shared with administrators and educators. If we hope to have more capable front line workers, then we must provide them with appropriate learning opportunities. It is likewise possible to share the learning from this project with the members of the District Educational Leadership Team, who could, in turn, pass it on to the administrators. In this trickle-down approach, the administrators of the school could share the concepts of belonging and academic self esteem with their staff at a staff meeting. Ideally, then, these ideas could be incorporated into school growth plans for this coming September (2003).

I believe we are in the process of reconceptualizing an educational system that is more inclusive and supportive of First Nations learners and their families, but more work is required in this area. Teachers may need guidance to understand that their expectations may be unrealistic and damaging to the child's academic self-esteem and sense of belonging. A story written by Little Bear and Hummux (n.d.) explored the notion that our knowledge may be incomplete. These authors challenge us to reconsider our superior attitude. This story tells us that in the beginning of time, the Creator divided the teachings into four parts and gave each race their own special knowledge:

> The Yellow People were entrusted with *Spirit* and the element of *fire*. The Black People were given *Soul* corresponding to the element of *water*. The White People learned about the *Mind* and the element of *air*. And the Red People had *Body* and the element of *earth*. (Little Bear & Hummux, n.d., ¶ 2)

As time passed, each group forgot that their knowledge was incomplete and they began to quarrel with one another. "The people of the Mind believe their knowledge is all that is needed. So they destroy the *Body* of Mother Earth, and ignore *Spirit* and *Soul* altogether "(Little Bear & Hummux, n.d., ¶ 9). It is possible to solve this problem, the authors asserted, if we return to the concept of balance.

I believe that from this story, we need to carry forth the awareness that there may be other areas as vital as the school work we ask the children to do. Certainly, the work of the Mind is important, but are we giving them all that they need? Ultimately, for the hours that the children are in our guardianship, are we taking care? Are we taking care of the Body (learning styles), the Soul (academic self-esteem), and the Spirit (sense of belonging)?

Future Research

There has not been a significant amount of research done on literacy and First Nations' elementary students. In addition to a lack of research related to First Nations, the amount of Canadian content reduces the small pile even further. The *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* does offer a variety of topics, but the bulk of the work tends to be on higher education and native language issues. Considering the importance of improving the academic self-esteem and academic success of our First Nations students, I see enormous potential for future studies.

There is an important opportunity to consider the possible impact that teachers can provide for the extension of oral language. How many conversational exchanges with students are teachers engaging in during the course of a school day? Does the classroom provide for enough opportunities for teachers to interact with individual children? With the recent increase of class sizes in British Columbia and elsewhere, will teachers be able to spend time with the ones who need it the most? Clay (1998) challenged teachers and caregivers to talk to the ones who are least able to reply, even when the going gets hard. Clay (1991, 1998) also reminds adults to listen when the child wants to talk; reply and extend the conversation. Will these things be possible in more crowded classrooms?

Two interesting considerations for future research can be drawn from the work of Horowitz and Samuels (1987). First, they discussed the concept of "school oral discourse" (Horowitz & Samuels, 1987, p. 9), and how it is unlike the oral language found in homes. This makes it decontextualized for many students. They likewise found this decontextualization in school textbooks. Second, they felt that the listening required in schools is unlike the listening that is learned at home: "School listening is a more intense and analytical kind of listening" (Horowitz & Samuels, 1987, p. 10). Healy (1990) also felt that children are engaged in too much passive listening. She stated they may "spend a great deal of time 'listening' (to the TV, to the teacher), but they need to listen *better*, not just listen *more*. Real listening is an active mental process that serves understanding and memory" (Healy, 1990, p. 96).

Also relevant to the study of classroom listening is the idea of noise level in the classroom. Interestingly, Healy (1990) stated that we “need to look at this ideology of silence; why is it that silence is seen as being in control and talk is seen as being out of control? Children can’t be passive learners!” (p. 95). Are teachers who provide opportunities for discussion amongst students seen as having classrooms that are out of control? Is it manageable to have 30 children engaged in small group conversations? If they are conversing amongst themselves on a topic, are sufficient language gains being made by children with oral language difficulties? Are the children able to serve as language role models? Is the amount of language being used of benefit to these children?

Finally, my last suggestion for future research relates to the ideas presented by Kehoe and Echols (1994). The notion that children are dropping out of school because they may not feel a sense of belonging is, in my opinion, a preventable tragedy. Are we doing enough at the school level to foster a sense of belonging? Kehoe and Echols cite the work of Kleinfeld, and the importance of teacher caring and expectations for First Nations students. Two important considerations arise here. First, teachers need to have expectations for First Nations students that are the same as those they have for other children. First Nations parents want that much for their children, too. Second, the teacher is the determining factor in the classroom environment. Do all children feel valued and cared for? As Clay (1998) has challenged adults with oral language development, I challenge teachers to care about the children who are angry: care when they push you away; show them that they are important, even when their behaviour is inappropriate, for that is when they need it the most!

Lessons Learned

Personal Lessons

1. Part of Leadership Is Developing Relationships

Life is relationships. Relationships surround us. An emotionally intelligent leader recognizes the value of these relationships and harnesses their power. "Under the guidance of an EI [emotionally intelligent] leader, people feel a mutual comfort level. They share ideas, learn from one another, make decisions collaboratively and they get things done" (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002, p. 21). This learning process has allowed me to recognize that my intuitive knowledge about people and relationships are an asset. I now know that what I previously believed to be a simplistic awareness of children and a sense of humour is instead an ability to use playfulness and enthusiasm to lead others. Goleman et al. stated that by

> speaking authentically from [your] own values and resonating with the emotions of those around [you], [you] hit just the right cords with [your] message, leaving people feeling uplifted and inspired....When a leader triggers resonance, you can read it in people's eyes: They're engaged and they light up. (2002, p. 20)

There was a time when I believed I had to leave this part of myself behind if I was to become a successful leader. Yet, my intuitive awareness of others around me, and my skills at developing relationships are important. In fact, Goleman et al. (2002) stated, "Perhaps most important, connecting with others at an emotional level makes work more meaningful" (p. 21). Recognizing the knowledge of head and heart are significant, because "gifted leadership occurs where heart and head—feeling and thought—meet. These are the two wings that allow a leader to soar" (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 26).

2. There Is Power in Stories and Metaphors

I have always believed in the power of story, and have used stories as a way to engage the children in my class in discussions about important lessons. I fought against the urge within myself to use story during this project; yet in the end, the lesson I needed to leave with the participants of my project was that there is power in story. In fact, the First Nations people are an oral society, who have depended on stories to pass on their knowledge and wisdom. Stories have been used to teach, explain, and entertain. Stories have been a primary method of passing on their culture. By capitalizing on this traditional form of learning, we can not only increase the children's knowledge of their culture, but also develop the rich vocabulary which will serve as a strong foundation for future academic success.

3. It Is Important to Work the Plan

A further lesson was making the plan—and then making the plan work. In the prospectus, I outlined a timeline, and against my procrastinating nature I followed the timeline I had established for myself. This was the best gift I could have given myself. It allowed me the opportunity to live with the data for a while, when I needed time to process information or to reconsider the choices I had made about my research methods. It meant that I had the time to revisit sections that I didn't feel were quite right.

Also, following the timeline allowed me to honour my personal learning style. I love the acquisition of the research, the seeking, the finding—this is a primal instinct for me, like hunting. As a result, I amassed an amazing amount of "important" material. My learning style also is such that I need a place and a colour for everything. All of my literature review sub-sections were assigned a colour. Relevant articles were filed in colour-coded binders; highlighters and Post-It® notes also reflected research findings relevant to the sub-section. While this may sound somewhat laborious and time consuming, it served two purposes for me. First, I knew where everything was, and books with multiple relevancies could be easily accessed when needed. Second, it gave me a sense of calm and peace. It is hard to explain, but knowing that I had the material I needed reduced my anxiety. Perhaps, in this way, I was like a squirrel packing away as many nuts as I could for winter. If you gather enough, you know you won't starve. Without the luxury of time, these things would have been significantly more challenging.

4. Work With Qualified Professionals

Also connected to the writing process, and relevant to future students who may one day read this section hoping for insight into their project, is my advice to get qualified help. Hire an editor. Academic writing and the APA Style are areas of expertise, and if these are not your areas of expertise, then enlist the assistance of someone who is an expert. It is the second best gift I gave myself. Finally, if you have not already done so, find an excellent supervisor, someone who is supportive and helpful. I did, and it was another wonderful gift I gave myself.

Seasonal Lessons

One interpretation of the medicine wheel says that the four sides of the wheel represent wisdom, innocence, introspection, and illumination. It is felt that when we are born, we are given a particular point that guides our life, but that we must strive to gain knowledge and wisdom from all points of the circle to become a whole person. Likewise, I needed to gain knowledge and wisdom from all of the seasons of my project.

Spring Lesson

The spring lesson was to trust the process. A now famous catch phrase within the MALT community, "trust the process" is so true. There were times within this project that I felt dizzy from the very nature of this cyclical process. However, trusting the process allowed me to continue. In the end, it is interesting to reflect on the evolution of thought from pondering the first question to where I am now. When I originally began to formulate my question, I was wondering about improving my capacity as a teacher of oral language. Would the project focus on myself, or on working with teachers? As time progressed, and I looked at my concerns using a systems approach, I realized that I wanted to work with parents. Therefore, I am not on the road that I thought I would be on, but I have travelled a good road.

Summer Lessons

My lessons during the literature review included the thrill of the hunt and a new passion for reading professional material. Summer was a long season. I spent a lot of time doing the research; in fact, I had to learn to let it go. I constantly wondered, "Is it enough yet?" The hunter in me thought that one more search may turn up something new, some jewel I couldn't live without. In the end, I realized that I had surpassed saturation, and unless I wanted to refocus my question, I needed to get on with it. This was not a project for becoming an expert on literacy—the one subtopic that really distracted me for a while. I felt some fear within myself that if I was doing a Masters, and literacy was part of the project, I had better become an expert. This may have turned around for me when my supervisor said, "Do you want to do your project on literacy?" Or perhaps it turned when I read my sponsor's Masters project, and realized that it was not as huge as I thought it needed to be. I think I originally had Doctoral expectations for this Masters project.

Another significant learning for me during the summer phase was my new-found interest in professional literature. My teaching partner years ago used to ask me, “Have you read…?” She always made me laugh. Why would I want to read that? I think quite differently now. I now enjoy reading professional books, and have purchased many. I check the reference sections of these books to see if any titles catch my eye. I believe that the legacy of this research reading will last a lifetime, and that I will continue to add to my professional collection.

Fall Lessons

I have four main lessons from my work with the parents during the fall:

1. Relationships are the key.
2. Communication is essential.
3. A vision brings us together.
4. Empowering others is energizing.

I have long believed that relationships are key to effective leadership. What I now know is that leadership takes many forms, and that effective relationship building has been vital to the success of my project. Values-based leadership acknowledges that “treating people with respect is what moral leadership is about, and nothing could be harder. But when there is organizational or social necessity for change, nothing is more practical” (O’Toole, 1995, p. 12).

Taking the time to meet with each participant one-on-one helped to establish our relationship. Effective communication facilitates the relationship-building process. It was necessary to listen with attention and speak with intention. Conversing with participants is different from conversing at them. Keeping my language free of teacher and research jargon was conscious, so as not to exclude anyone. It was and is important to be conscious of your audience; effective communication does not speak above or below people. I used inclusive language that was collaborative, by paying attention to details such as "our children" versus "your children."

In order to facilitate the creation of a shared vision, each parent was asked to share their hopes for their child at school. These were listed on chart paper and posted on the wall in our meeting room. This served as a visual reminder about our purpose for coming together. The ability to identify with the shared vision is necessary to increase buy-in, and served as a purpose for coming together. In the book *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (1992), Schein stated that "the articulation of values into a philosophy of operating can be helpful in bringing a group together, serving as a source of identity and core mission" (p. 21). What I hoped the parents would take away from this experience is the belief that their children can succeed. Yukl (2002) reminded us, "A vision should be simple and idealistic, a picture of a desirable future....[It] should appeal to the values, hopes and ideals of organizational members....[It] should be challenging but realistic" (p. 283).

Empowerment does not mean that you are giving away your power. Rather, it means that you are enabling others to act, by thoughtfully considering the participants and upholding the group's ideals, beliefs, and hopes, and by "enlisting the hearts and minds of [the participants] through inclusion and participation" (O'Toole, 1995, p. 11). In the video *The Power of Vision* (Charthouse Learning & Barker, 1989) it is noted that "vision without action is dreaming. Action without vision is just passing time. Vision and action can change the world." My vision for this project was oral language development, but it was also one of empowerment. I was able to accomplish my empowerment goals for this project, for ultimately, that is what it was all about—helping the participants to help their children. The reciprocity of learning occurred for me when I discovered the joy of knowing I had made a difference in the life of a child. As mentioned in Fall – Study Findings and Conclusions, one parent wrote, "I have noticed a change in her already."

Winter Lessons

Winter lessons included doing justice to the writing, valuing simplicity, and the importance of advocating for First Nations learners. The season of winter brought the writing. It was now time to gather my thoughts and translate them into words that would meet the academic needs of this degree, and the accessibility needs of the people with whom I was working. Issues of self-doubt arose, and needed to be worked through. Giving myself permission to step outside of the box and reformat the suggested chapter system was the easiest part of the writing. It just felt right. My only concern became doing it justice. The metaphor of the wheel was important to me, and I wanted to deliver it well. I have tried in my writing to identify not with any one nation, but rather to present my findings from the perspective of likeness. Undeniably, there are differences between bands and nations, but underlying it all is a thread of commonality. This thread is the one that has stitched this project together.

What I value is simplicity. Using a metaphor or story holds important lessons, and serves as an easy way to make learning accessible to others. The field of academia is not simplistic. This realm is intimidating. I read a story about a man who held a box up to his face. He could only see one side of the box, but he discovered that if he held the box out further, he could see three sides. If he held it out yet further, on an angle between himself and another, they could see all six sides of the box between the two of them (Hampton, 1995). And so it has been with this writing: I have tried to pull the box away from my face to see more sides, and then hold it out further yet, so that I might know about the sides of the box that my participants were seeing.

I walk away from this experience with a new passion. I have long been an advocate for First Nations learners, but now I am more prepared to speak with knowledge and conviction about the issues that surround their academic experience. The two concepts of sense of belonging and academic self-esteem

(Kehoe & Echols, 1994) are key pieces of learning that I take with me from this experience.

In short, I have learned that my research is about people, and that therefore it is about life. Relationships are the key. In every leadership challenge and opportunity during this project, focusing on the relationship has helped me maintain my course. The four sides of the wheel—innocence, introspection, wisdom, and illumination—like spring, summer, fall, and winter, have been sources of learning and knowledge for me. As winter comes to an end, spring returns. The opportunity lies now for another researcher to look to the east—the direction of the rising sun, the beginning of a new day—to find their research question and opportunity, and to begin the cycle again.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. How many children do you have?
2. Do you have a partner? If parenting alone, do you receive support from others?
3. Are you employed?
4. What is your highest level of education?
5. Were you read to as a child?

Your Preschooler

6. What entertains your child?
7. Does your child enjoy listening to stories?
8. How many hours of TV does your child watch per day? Video games?
9. Does your family eat dinner together?
10. Does your child help with household chores?
11. What is your child's favourite toy?
12. Does your child look at books at home?
13. Where are the books kept?
14. What are your hopes for your child at school?

Yourself

15. How would you describe your school experience?

16. Did you have a significant adult encouraging you during school?
17. What is your best school memory?
18. Were cultural stories/experiences part of your childhood?
19. If you have older children attending school, what has worked well for your older child at school?

APPENDIX B

Final Questionnaire

1. Did you learn something new at the workshops?

   What was helpful?

2. Were the presentations effective?

   Were your interests, concerns or needs discussed?

3. Did the presenter listen to you?

   Did you feel supported?

4. One goal of the project was to "help others learn"—was this achieved?

5. Describe the learning experience for yourself. Were the workshops meaningful and presented appropriately?

6. If you had to make one recommendation for future workshops, what would that be?

APPENDIX C

In With the Tide – A Story by Laura Sewid

The wind blew.

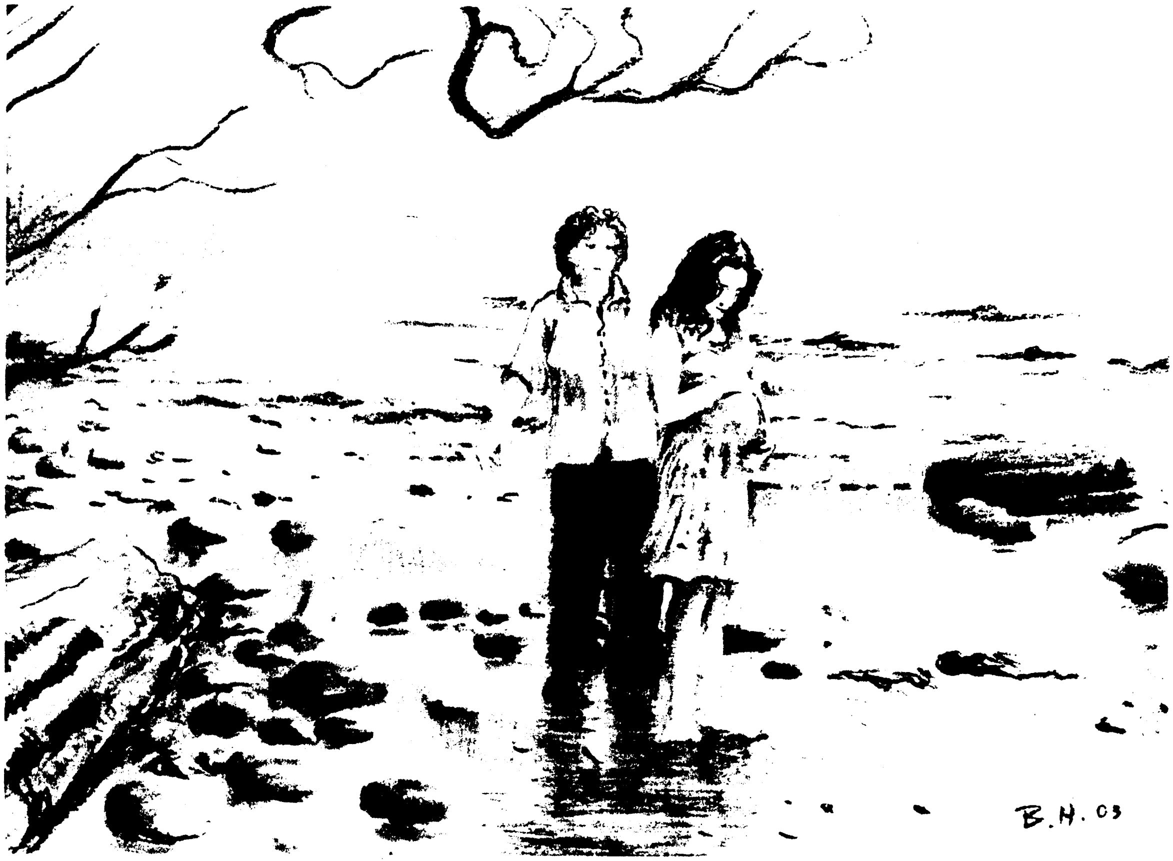
The young woman stood by the edge of the water watching the wind bring the waves in. Her mind began to wander. She tried to picture her unborn child. She began to worry about her ability to prepare her child for the future. Her grandmother found her standing there, looking worried.

The grandmother asked, "What is it, my child? What puts such a troubled look upon your face?"

"Oh, Grandmother, am I ready to be a mother? How will I know what to do?"

The grandmother replied, "It is normal to feel fear, for indeed your responsibilities are great. But, you have been prepared for this journey you will take with your new child."

She asked, "Tell me how I have been prepared, because I do not feel prepared."



Beaches. Original artwork by Robert Hemphill (©2003). Reprinted with permission of the artist. Artist can be contacted at http://www.roberthemphill.com

“You will need to remember the teachings of the elders. Your child needs the gifts that come from our ancestors. Remember the words we have given you and pass them to your child.”

“Grandmother, how will that really help?”

“My child, I hear the doubt in your voice. Today’s children need to be given the tools to succeed.”

"Tools, what tools?"

"Your child needs the wisdom and experience of our culture. Our culture has always been one rich in oral tradition. Families gathered in the winter months to share traditional foods, tell stories, sing songs, and dance. This passed the culture on to the next generation, and began the love of the story. This is still true for today's children. The sharing of stories opens up new worlds for our children. We can tell them about things they have never seen. In this way, we enrich their lives and their vocabularies. The more they hear these words, the sooner the words become their own. The children in today's world need to understand these words, so that when they go to school they will understand the stories their teacher reads to them, and the ones they read on their own. Yesterday's child listened to stories, stories told again and again. Today's child will hear and read many stories. Storytime is about understanding the story. Having heard words and stories, today's children will be ready to understand the words they will hear when they go to school.

"The creator gave you the gift of learning language and you will pass this on to your child. Conversations with a young child will increase the number of words he or she knows. Conversations and demonstrations have always been used by elders as a way to teach children. Let me explain. When my grandfather taught my father how to fish, he took him to the ocean and spoke to him. He explained what they were doing and why. His hands would guide the hands of my father as he learned to mend the net. Always, though, the elders spoke to the children. We used life experience and talk as a way of teaching our children.

“My own grandmother would take me with her to prepare the fish my grandfather had caught. All the while she spoke to me, she spoke of respecting the fish, she spoke of how to prepare the fish for smoking, she explained how we would prepare the fish for storage so we would not be hungry in the winter. The days with my grandmother were filled with words, words, words, but what I remember is the feeling of love.”

The Grandmother continued, “I can remember my grandmother telling me that the reason stories were repeated was because hearing a story once does not mean you understand the story. She told me, ‘Do not believe that because you have heard the story once that you understand the story. What it means to you at four is not the same as it will mean to you at forty.’ We bring new life experiences to each repetition of the story and so we are better prepared to understand the story. Stories are like the ocean. The ocean comes into the beach each day with the tide, but what it leaves behind always looks different. And so it is with stories.

“Today’s child needs words, his tools, to be successful in school. The creator gave you the gift of learning language and you must pass this on. When your child says, ‘Fish,’ you will reply, ‘Yes, that is a big fish.’ The creator gave you this gift of modelling language.

“Each time you and your child exchange conversation, important learning is happening in his brain. Each time your child asks a question, it is an opportunity to help your child learn more words. Each time you encourage your child to tell you more, you give your child the gift of your patience and listening. Children need the opportunity to talk, and explain and ask questions, if they are to ready themselves for school and for adult life. The more words that your child takes to school, the better prepared they will be to understand the stories and the lessons the teacher will tell.”

“Oh, Grandmother, how can I thank you? I feel so much better. I will remember the wisdom of the elders. Sharing stories and talking with my child can prepare him or her for school. Everyday activities are opportunities to learn new words. I want my child to be successful at school and to be proud of our heritage. Both of these things are possible.”