



First Nations Elders' and Parents' Views on Supporting their Children's Language Development



Points de vue d'anciens et de parents des Premières nations concernant le soutien visant le développement langagier de leurs enfants

KEY WORDS

FIRST NATIONS

PARENTS' BELIEFS

ELDERS' BELIEFS

LANGUAGE GOALS

LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION

CULTURE

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Abstract

This exploratory study aimed to support practitioners to provide services in ways that are culturally congruent by gaining insights into First Nations Elders', grandparents', and parents' views and goals for their children's speech, early language acquisition, and communication. Conversational interviews with 65 First Nations Elders, grandparents, and parents of young children in four provinces in Canada yielded information about their beliefs and values regarding their children's speech-language learning, the perceived value of early learning and intervention programs, and roles and goals for speech-language services. The findings challenge prevalent stereotypes that First Nations caregivers prefer children to be quiet, while highlighting language socialization goals for children to learn and respond to social cues regarding the amount, form, and contexts of verbalization. The findings invite S-LPs to consider a role they could have in relation to the high value that many First Nations caregivers place on their children becoming bilingual in English and their Indigenous language. First Nations caregivers' receptivity to S-LP services was confirmed, as long as services are provided in ways that ensure cultural safety for children and families. The findings reinforce long-standing calls for investments in strengthening capacities of First Nations people to support speech and language development in ways that are locally appropriate and in accordance with the particular values, goals, and language socialization practices of individual families.

Abrégé

Cette étude exploratoire visait à soutenir les praticiens dans une prestation de services de manières qui soient culturellement congruentes en essayant de comprendre les points de vue et les buts des anciens, grands-parents et parents de Premières nations touchant le langage, l'acquisition précoce du langage et la communication de leurs enfants. Des entrevues sous forme de conversations tenues avec 65 anciens, grands-parents et parents de jeunes enfants de Premières nations dans quatre provinces du Canada ont rapporté des informations sur leurs croyances et leurs valeurs quant à l'apprentissage langagier de leurs enfants, à la valeur perçue des programmes d'apprentissage précoce et d'intervention, et quant aux rôles et aux buts des services d'orthophonie. Les conclusions viennent à l'encontre des stéréotypes en cours voulant que les soignants des Premières nations préfèrent que les enfants soient tranquilles, tout en soulignant les objectifs de socialisation linguistique permettant aux enfants d'apprendre et de répondre aux indices sociaux touchant la quantité, la forme et les contextes de la verbalisation. Les conclusions invitent les orthophonistes à considérer un rôle qu'ils pourraient avoir en relation avec la haute valeur que de nombreux soignants des Premières nations accordent à l'acquisition d'un bilinguisme incluant l'anglais et leur langue autochtone par leurs enfants. La réceptivité des soignants des Premières nations aux services d'orthophonie a été confirmée, en autant que les services soient dispensés de manière à assurer la sécurité culturelle des enfants et des familles. Les conclusions viennent étayer les appels de longue date à des investissements consacrés au renforcement des capacités des peuples des Premières nations de soutenir le développement langagier de façons qui sont localement appropriées et qui respectent les valeurs, les objectifs et les pratiques de socialisation particuliers des familles individuelles.

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Introduction

Little is known about First Nations, Métis, or Inuit caregivers' expectations, goals, and approaches to their young children's speech and language development. Yet these are populations with growing needs for support to ensure optimal development outcomes. The population of Aboriginal children in Canada is increasing at 2.5 times the rate of non-Indigenous children in Canada: approximately 9% of Aboriginal children are under 5 years of age, compared to 5% in the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2008). Aboriginal children are far more likely than non-Aboriginal children to live in conditions that create challenges to their optimal developmental and educational outcomes: more Aboriginal children live below the poverty line (52%), in sub-standard housing, and in single parent families (40%), and they are more likely to be placed in special learning classes soon after commencing school, and to leave school without achieving a high school diploma (Ball, 2008; Findlay & Janz, 2012a, 2012b; Statistics Canada, 2008). On virtually all major health indicators, Aboriginal children have poorer outcomes compared to non-Aboriginal children (Adelson, 2005; MacMillan et al., 2010; Smylie, 2009).

Speech-language delay and disorders are perceived to be one of the most prevalent developmental challenges for Aboriginal children (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; de Leeuw, Fiske, & Greenwood, 2002; Minister of Public Works and Government Services, 2002). This perception, largely based on informal information gathering, was reinforced in a recent study by Statistics Canada, one of only a few studies that have gone beyond summarizing anecdotal information (Findlay & Janz, 2012a, 2012b). Using an 'Aboriginal Children's Survey' tool created by Statistics Canada in consultation with a largely Aboriginal committee, analysis of parent-reported health problems of 12,845 Aboriginal children aged 6 months to 5 years old indicated that speech-language difficulties were among the top three health conditions reported by parents (10% of First Nations children ($n=5,167$); 9% of Métis children ($n=3,793$) (Findlay & Janz, 2012a; Findlay & Kohen, 2013); and 5% of Inuit children ($n=1,693$) (Findlay & Janz, 2012b). About three-quarters of children reported by parents as having a speech-language difficulty had reportedly received a professional diagnosis, and approximately the same number had reportedly received some type of treatment.

Given that a 10% prevalence of speech-language delays prior to school entry has been consistently reported for children across North America, the prevalence of speech-

language delays among Aboriginal children may seem to be of little note. However, speech-language delays can be indicators of concomitant developmental problems (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin 2001; Lindsay, Dockrell, & Strand, 2007; Powell & Bishop, 1992). In the context of English-medium, mainstream schooling in Canada and the U.S.A., weak language skills are associated with less readiness for school (Justice, Pence Turnbull, Bowles, & Skibbe, 2009), behaviour problems, poorer attention, lower cognitive performance, lower literacy skills, and lower educational achievement later in development (Silva, Williams, & McGee, 1987; Young et al., 2002). The overall persisting poor health, developmental, and educational difficulties found in the population of Aboriginal children in Canada, noted earlier, suggests that speech-language difficulties may be an early warning sign that warrants closer examination to determine whether enhanced language facilitation in the home, prevention, or early interventions could contribute to optimal developmental outcomes.

Early interventions have higher returns than later interventions (Heckman, 2006). Many Aboriginal groups in Canada are working to strengthen local capacity and government support for high quality, culturally informed early learning programs, primary school, and clinical ancillary services in order to improve Indigenous young children's opportunities for a successful start in school and in life. Within this context, there has been an increasingly audible call for programs to support Indigenous children's early language development.

Recently, a team of SAC members found that, among 1,194 S-LPs and hearing professionals who responded to a survey, more than half had provided services to Aboriginal young children between 2005 and 2010 (SAC, 2011). The authors reported that professionals expressed a high need for more information about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, languages, and communication development in order to feel prepared to work with these populations, but there is a scarcity of relevant information. As noted, there are many anecdotal reports of children's difficulties with speech development and early language learning, and cultural mismatches between mainstream services provided by non-Indigenous practitioners have allegedly led to ineffective actions and mis-interpretations of the sources, nature, and severity of Indigenous children's language development (B.C. Aboriginal Network on Disability Society, 1996; Eriks-Brophy, Quittenbaum, Anderson, & Nelson, 2008; Peltier, 2011; Sterzuk, 2008). It appears that, too often, language differences, and the cultural nature of raising children in First Nations, Métis,

and Inuit communities have been seen by cultural outsiders - including many teachers and clinicians - as evidence of deficits and dysfunction, rather than of 'differences' that are normative within children's home environments and that may contribute importantly to children's identities, cultural learning, and sense of belonging within their families and communities (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Battisti, Campbell, Friesen, & Krauth, 2011).

It has long been known that parents' expectations about their children's language development and the ways they interact with their children to promote their goals can vary significantly across cultures (Harkness & Super, 1996; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Cultures vary in the types of competence that adults encourage in children, the developmental timetable they use to guide their actions, and the level of proficiency in various skills they want their children to achieve (Heath, 1983). Languages embody the cultures they express, varying from other languages along many dimensions relevant to children's early learning, including beliefs about teaching language to children, the value of talk, the significance of context for kinds of talk, aspects of story-telling, how status is handled in interactions, beliefs about intentionality, cause and effect, and aspects of social organization related to language-mediated interaction (Van Kleeck, 1994). Understanding cultural variations in goals for children's language learning, language socialization, and the pragmatics of communication heightens awareness of potential cultural biases in prevention and early intervention services. For example, Heath (1983) found that children whose home culture values listening, observing, and doing rather than a lot of talk are more likely to be marginalized when they arrived in a mainstream school where a high value is placed on verbal explanations and oral participation. This potential was underscored in a summary of descriptions of language socialization practices in Aboriginal families by Pesco and Crago (2008). Given the diverse cultural, linguistic, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children and families that may be seen by S-LPs, it is important to understand the values and perceptions of primary caregivers with respect to their children's language development.

A survey of speech-language pathologists (S-LPs) across Canada who had more than two years of experience serving Aboriginal children concluded that an altogether different approach from mainstream practice approaches is needed when serving Aboriginal children, families, and communities (Ball & Lewis, 2011). While the speculations of outsiders to First Nations families and communities are raising questions about appropriate

goals and roles for speech-language pathologists, published reports of the perspectives of First Nations parents and Elders themselves regarding these goals and roles have been lacking. As Peltier (2011), an Anishnaabek S-LP, notes: "Most S-LPs in Canada are not of Aboriginal descent and many clinicians have limited experience with Aboriginal populations. The perceived difficulty in service provision may stem from a mismatch between professional attitudes on one hand and the community values and ways of doing and knowing among Aboriginal peoples on the other hand" (p.127).

Alongside the evident need for early speech-language supports for Aboriginal children, there is growing commitment within the speech-language profession in Canada to improve services for Aboriginal children, shown for example in the focus on Aboriginal service needs at recent national and provincial conferences for S-LPs and audiologists. Within the profession, there is growing understanding of the need to create the conditions for cultural safety for Indigenous people seeking services for themselves or a family member (Ball, 2011; Smye & Browne, 2002; Zeidler, 2011). The timing, location, form, and intention of offering professional speech-language services can all affect whether a prospective client experiences cultural safety (Smye & Browne, 2002). When a parent or other caregiver seeks S-LP services, cultural safety can be promoted by avoiding assumptions about their goals for their child's speech and language development or for the support they are seeking from a professional (Ball, 2011; Peltier, 2011). A first step for a professional is to ask the primary caregiver about their goals for their child's speech and language development. It is also important to find out what Elders within a child's cultural community think about speech development and language learning. Elders are older community members who are often sought by parents and children for guidance based on their knowledge and wisdom about what is important for First Nations people to bring from the past into the future in terms of language, culture, spirituality and ways of life. As well, many First Nations children are being raised within circles of care that include grandparents in primary caregiving or other key roles. A key finding of a recent study on grandparent caregiving was an extremely high prevalence of grandparent caregiving among First Nations children in Canada: despite comprising roughly 1.4% of Canadian's over 45 years old, more than 17% of caregiving grandparents in Canada were of Aboriginal descent (Fuller-Thomson, 2005). The investigator speculated that, among other factors, First Nations grandparents' strong desire to preserve their culture may be one motivation for their caregiving. Broadening

one's scope to find out about the goals, practices, and potential contributions of extended family members may be a useful starting point for S-LPs seeking ways to ensure culturally congruent and safe practice.

S-LPs working with children to support their language development must have the means to learn about each family's values, beliefs, and priorities with regards to the language and communication development of their children. Using the Developmental Expectations Questionnaire to assess and compare the developmental knowledge and goals of parents and preschool teachers, Edwards, Gandini, and Giovanni (1996) found significant differences between the expectations held by parents and teachers depending on the community and culture. Sigel and Kim (1996) explored the relationship between parents' beliefs about children's learning and found that parents will likely report different beliefs about children's learning and their own efforts to teach children depending on whether the parent is directed to think of their own child, any child, or all children. In the current study, participants were directed to think of their own young child or grandchild. Westby (1990) suggested an interview format with open-ended questions asked in a somewhat informal, guided conversation. This was the approach taken in the current study.

The current study was intended to support practitioners' aim to provide services in ways that are culturally congruent by gaining insights into First Nations Elders', grandparents', and parents' views and goals for their children's early language acquisition and communication. The study sought their views about how their children learn language, how to support children's speech and language learning, the value of talk by and with children, the relative importance of Indigenous and English language acquisition, any challenges to their children's speech and language learning, and roles for S-LPs.

Method

Participants. Participants were 65 self-identified First Nations Elders¹, grandparents, and parents with at least one child under 7 years of age in four provinces in Canada, including 15% (n=10) Elders, 20% (n=13) grandparents, and 65% (n=42) parents. Although it is often a child's parent who decides whether and why to bring a child for assessment or intervention services, the views of Elders were sought in this study because the guidance of certain older members of First Nations who are revered for their wisdom and knowledge of cultural traditions is often taken into serious consideration by younger First Nations people.

Grandparents were included because they often play central roles in raising First Nations children. Grandparents in the current study all reported having face-to-face contact on a weekly basis or more often with at least some of their grandchildren; none were the primary caregiver. Among the participants, 67% lived in rural communities and 33% lived in urban communities². Lack of transportation funds to enable the investigators to travel limited possibilities for recruiting a representative national sample; however an effort was made to find interviewers who were well-situated to recruit participants. Among 65 participants, 29% (n=19) lived in Saskatchewan, 28% (n=18) in Manitoba, 23% (n=15) in Ontario, and 20% (n=13) in B.C.

Four paid interviewers were contracted to recruit participants, to use a prescribed procedure for requesting informed consent, and to gather data according to a prescribed interview protocol. Two of the four interviewers identified as First Nations people. Three of the four interviewers were speech-language pathologists.

Interviewers recruited participants from towns and on-reserve communities in their respective province of residence. Initially a convenience sample was used, drawing upon contacts that the interviewers had as a result of long-standing, trusting relationships with First Nations people in their regions. Respondents were offered refreshments and a small honorarium to recognize their contribution of time and personal knowledge. Interviews were conducted in the interviewee's community at a location of their choosing, including respondents' homes and community facilities such as recreation or education centres.

Procedure. Respondents participated in a one-hour individual conversational interview conducted in the manner described by Westby (1990), guided by the interviewers' pre-planned questions shown in Appendix 1. The questionnaire was developed collaboratively and iteratively. Initially, a mix of open- and closed-ended questions were designed by the authors and a group of S-LP practitioners and scholars interested in gaining insight for practitioners wishing to support speech and language development of Indigenous children. The authors also created a protocol for exactly how interviewers should ask questions (e.g., the question sequence, responses to requests for clarification, sample follow-up probes, etc.), a response form for hand-writing answers, and a requirement of reading recorded answers to the open-ended questions to respondents to check for accuracy before moving on to the next question. Audio-recording was used in the pilot phase, but not in the formal data collection phase, as it was determined during the pilot

phase that audio-taping could be a barrier to recruitment and to the spontaneity and fullness of respondents' answers. During the formal interviewing phase, interviewers made extensive hand-written notes of the interviewee's responses to each question. These notes were read back to the interviewee to ensure accuracy.

The list of initial questions and the protocol for conducting the interview were revised over a series of pilot interviews conducted by two of the four interviewers. Revisions generally involved shortening the list of questions to ensure that data could be collected within approximately one hour and clarifying the wording of some questions and probes to ensure that respondents readily understood the intended meaning of each question. During the formal data collection phase, pilot respondents were not included in the research sample. Interviewers typed the answer form to ensure that it was clearly understandable by the project team members who analyzed the data. Questions addressed: demographic information; important learning during early childhood; how children learn; how children learn language; the relative importance of listening and talking; parents' roles in helping their children learn; children's learning in their mother tongue and/or English; the value and effectiveness of early childhood and 'school readiness' programs; non-Indigenous people working with their children; and helpful actions to support Indigenous people to elaborate and use their own ways for supporting their children's learning. As well, some questions asked participants to specify an age range for developments in children's speech and language acquisition.

Frequency analysis was used to summarize participants' responses to closed-ended questions (e.g., asking for an age range). Statistical analyses to determine inter-province differences in patterns of responses were not possible due to the low sample size for each province. Chi-square analyses were conducted to explore relationships between responses and parent/grandparent or Elder status. The co-principal investigators, who were not interviewers, used a collaborative, iterative, qualitative data analysis procedure to develop a pragmatic coding system (Burnard, 2006) to summarize responses to open-ended questions. Each team member reviewed half of the participants' responses with the goal of constructing themes or summary statements that represented recurring ideas expressed by participants. The team members then compared their constructed thematic framework and read the other half of the response protocols with the goal of finding those components of the two frameworks that worked well to represent the data in the second set. This iterative and negotiated process

resulted in modifications to the thematic framework until the team was satisfied that it accounted for key recurring concepts, ideas, beliefs, and experiences expressed by participants.

Results

Language spoken by participants. English was the language predominantly used by 91% of the participants; 4.5% reported using Cree and 4% reported using Ojibway predominantly. Among the participants, 17 different Indigenous languages were reported as part of their ancestry: Dakota, Cree and Ojibway were the most common heritage languages reported (27%, 24% and 18% of interviewees, respectively). Ninety-seven percent of the interviewees reported that their children spoke English most of the time at home and in the community, however 27% reported that their children spoke an Indigenous language occasionally as a second language, including Cree (12%), Dakota (6%), Ojibway (4.5%), Cowichan, Dene, and Hul'q'umi'num' (4.5% in total). These languages reflect the geographical distribution of the sample.

Inter-province and inter-generational differences. Using Chi-square analyses, no significant differences were found between parents and the older generation of Elders and grandparents or among respondents based on province on any response variable.

Views about language development. Asked about when children "begin to talk", 12% of participants stated from birth to 6 months, 25% stated from 6 to 12 months, 37% stated from 12 to 18 months, 22% stated between 24 and 30 months, and 4% stated between 30 and 36 months. Asked about when they would become concerned if one of their children was not yet talking at all, 6% stated by 1 year of age, 20% stated by 2 years, 27% stated by 3 years, 25% stated by 4 years, 12% stated by 5 years, and 10% stated after 5 years of age.

Both talkative and quiet. Many (77%) Elders, grandparents, and parents stated that it is important that parents are talkative with their children to support children's language learning. However it was noted that, traditionally, parents demonstrated activities, with or without words, rather than engaging in a dialogue with a child. Asked if they preferred a child to be more "talkative" or "quiet", 56% preferred a "talkative" child, 12% preferred a "quiet" child, and 32% expressed no preference or stated that "it depends." Seventy-eight percent of the participants variously explained that children should become able and willing to express their ideas, thoughts, and questions verbally in order to support their learning, self-esteem, success

in school, and in life. As one parent commented: "They aren't going to learn if they're not talking, so I want them to talk." Nearly half of the participants, including all of the Elders, expressed that children should become able to be quiet at certain times, such as when Elders, adults, teachers, or visitors are talking and at certain events such as ceremonies, prayers, and feasts where it is important for children to observe, learn, and show respect. Teaching children to be observant and to learn when to talk and when to listen to the ideas, opinions, and answers of others was viewed as important and congruent with First Nations cultures. As well, some participants stated that children need to be shown, mainly through being ignored, that certain speech content is not valued, such as boasting or drawing attention to one's possessions, challenging the views of those older than oneself, and "stating the obvious" such as telling an older person something that the older person already knows or can see for themselves. A parent explained: "It seems that in preschool, the teacher often asks children to make a report or give a word for something that the teacher can plainly already see, like what colour is the sky today or how many cars are in the sandbox. We don't encourage children to speak up about things that anyone can know just by their own observing. It could be seen as rude."

Bilingual learning. A strong preference for children to learn both their mother tongue and English in their early years, including at home, in preschool, and in lower primary school, was expressed by three quarters of participants. Virtually all of the Elders expressed concern that the youngest generation in their community knows little of their heritage language, other than perhaps a few ceremonial prayers and songs. They explained that, without the language of their ancestors, their spiritual connection to those ancestors and the knowledge communicated through their language would be weakened. Many parents stated that their children need their heritage language in order to understand their identity and culture and for positive self-esteem. Parents also expressed the view that their children need English to survive and thrive in "non-traditional" environments including school and society as a whole, and their belief that it is easier to learn multiple languages in early childhood. No participant mentioned the possibility that it could be difficult for children to learn an Indigenous language that is not spoken in the home. One quarter of the participants preferred that children learn exclusively in their mother tongue at least through first grade to help them consolidate First Nations cultural identity which would be a foundation for their self-esteem and success in life. Only two participants expressed the view that children should only learn English.

Views about supports for early learning. First Nations Elders, grandparents, and parents generally expressed their view that love, care, and support from within a child's family and community have the greatest influence on children's early learning: the best ways to help children learn include spending time together with the children, telling them what they need to know, showing them, letting them try doing what is being taught, and then watch to see what they learned. A grandmother explained: "I take my grandkids out to do things – just going for a walk, or collecting mushrooms or grasses – see what interests them and talk with them about what we are seeing, ask what they are seeing. Talking and having experiences, just enjoying being together. That is a good way to get their words flowing." Virtually all stated that children's learning in the early years is very important, particularly becoming socially interactive and proficient in at least one language. While emphasizing the primary role of the family in supporting young children's learning, participants also saw value in early learning programs and speech-language services: 92% wanted programs to support children's early learning, and 83% wanted programs specifically to support school readiness. Participants suggested ways that existing programs for young children could be improved, including: better information about programs; more spaces; better accessibility; more trained, caring, and committed teachers; more community commitment; more focus on family participation and learning; and more support for Indigenous language and cultural learning.

Views about supports for speech language development. When asked whether children need help learning to talk, 80% of participants responded affirmatively, and 88% responded affirmatively to the question: Do children need help learning to understand words? Participants described various approaches to supporting children's speech and language development: 58% described their view that talking with children was the most important stimulus; 23% stated that children learn by listening, watching, and observing people who are talking with other people or with them; 18% emphasized repeated exposure, including adults repeating words and using language in consistent ways in different contexts; 17% described the importance of providing opportunities for children to talk without receiving criticism, and with opportunities to ask and answer questions, to share stories, and to describe their experiences. Supplementing verbal communication with activities, showing, pointing, and enactments was described as helpful by 65% (n=28) of the parents and 48% (n=11) of Elders and grandparents. A parent described: "The actions that go with the words. Watching the motion to help with the meaning. Emotions

that are expressed with the words and sentences.” Some participants described in considerable detail various deliberate teaching methods that they thought were effective, such as sounding out words, pointing out object-word associations, repeating word sounds, emphasizing certain sounds, using repetition to teach words and concepts and building word groupings gradually, and using activities along with talking, such as telling children stories, demonstrating, pointing to things they are talking about, using facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and using all the senses (e.g., how things look, feel and sound). A third of the parents (33%; $n=14$) mentioned going at the right pace for the child, and being sure to pause and wait for a child to respond verbally or non-verbally. Talking to children in ways that are meaningful to children, giving children time to talk as well, as asking children questions and encouraging them to ask questions was considered useful. Though some approaches to supporting children’s speech and language development were more prevalent than others, virtually all of the participants described their view that children need to grow and develop their communication skills in an atmosphere of acceptance and love.

Preference for First Nations practitioners. Developing First Nations capacity to support young children’s speech and language development, including parents, community members, and professionals, was identified as a priority by many participants. Some participants explained that First Nations people often have culturally based ways of socializing children and promoting their learning, and some are proficient in an Indigenous language, so they are best suited to promote local goals for children’s early learning. Some participants pointed to the need for community members to receive training in how to help young children acquire Indigenous language while concurrently learning English.

Roles for non-Indigenous practitioners. Nearly 80% of participants expressed the view that a non-Indigenous person could support young First Nations children’s speech and language development if they were open-minded and willing to first learn and become knowledgeable about First Nations family systems, traditions, values, history, and current issues. As one participant noted, a non-Indigenous person would need to really grasp that most First Nations people view language as the vehicle for passing on their culture and as the basis of their identity and existence. Some participants advised that a non-Indigenous practitioner, or an Indigenous practitioner from outside the community, would need to work together with a First Nations community member to learn about local practices, values, and resources,

and they would need to be respectful and encouraging toward the children. They would need to support children’s bilingual learning, but not to the extent of trying to teach an Indigenous language: 19% of participants stated that a non-Indigenous person could not support language development in children, as they don’t know the values and beliefs that form the basis of language for First Nations people. All except one Elder stated that a non-Indigenous person could contribute to children’s language development by supporting their overall early learning journeys through their love, care, kindness, patience, and respect.

Discussion

Elders, grandparents, and parents readily volunteered to participate in the study; additional recruitment was limited by a small research budget and the need to find interviewers across the country who had good relationships with First Nations community members to conduct the interviews. Much research has shown that marked variability can occur in caregivers’ expectations for their children’s development both between and within cultures, and that in some instances, intracultural differences can be greater than intercultural differences. Given the tremendous cultural and linguistic variability among First Nations in Canada, findings of the current exploratory survey should be taken with caution. The recruitment success of this small, exploratory study suggests the positive potential of recruiting a wider diversity of First Nations Elders and parents to participate in a more comprehensive survey of beliefs, practices, and preferences surrounding their young children’s speech and language development, and their experiences of S-LP services.

Although participants came from a wide variety of urban and rural settings across Canada, there was considerable agreement on the topics discussed in the interviews. Overall, Elders, grandparents, and parents in this study expressed views that in many ways resembled those of non-First Nations parents, emphasizing the importance of early language learning and the primary roles of parents and other caregivers in the home for stimulating early language development by actively engaging children in dialogue, encouraging verbal expression, and providing specific language stimulation and feedback.

Some parents and Elders reported they would not be concerned if their child was not talking until three, four or even five years old. While some culturally-based variations in developmental timetables is expected, not talking until preschool age is far off of normative expectations for most children (Chapman, 2000),³ and points to a need for S-LPs

to collaborate with early childhood educators, community health assistants, infant development consultants, and other practitioners to promote caregivers' knowledge of basic milestones in language development as well as warning signs that a child may require some professional intervention. A recent survey of 1,194 S-LPs and hearing professionals, including about half who had served Indigenous children in the past five years, found that a majority used direct services, sometimes in combination with prevention and/or distant consults; few reported engaging in community-wide education or training of local people, which is a recommendation based on study findings (SAC, 2011). Population-based speech and language screening at periodic intervals could also help to ensure that all parents are fully informed of their children's development in the area of speech and language in a timely way.

Elders, grandparents, and parents saw value in early childhood programs as one way to promote their children's language proficiency. This finding resonates with calls by Aboriginal groups over the past two decades for increased investment in community-based early childhood programs such as Aboriginal Head Start (Ball, 2008). In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples identified community-based programs for young children and their families as the most promising entry-point for facilitating language acquisition and supporting heritage language and bilingual learning. Although systematic data have not been gathered, compared to school-based efforts, there appears to be more momentum in community-driven programs to include opportunities for children to be exposed to and to acquire some Indigenous language, for example in 'language nest' daycare where the primary caregivers speak only in an Indigenous language, bilingual early childhood programs, and Aboriginal Head Start programs.

Among specific goals mentioned, participants emphasized that their children need to be socialized to attend to situational cues to be more or less talkative. An exploratory study of First Nations English dialects pointed to several distinctive features of First Nations discourse, including differences in the use of silence, listening, eye contact behaviours, turn-taking, and topic development in narratives, suggesting that First Nations children may learn culturally distinctive participation frameworks compared to non-Indigenous children (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008)⁴. Findings of this exploratory study suggested that First Nations children may be silent and/or may not engage in casual conversation about obvious everyday matters (e.g., the weather) in an effort to be respectful to other people,

particularly adults. They may take a long time to respond to questions or to take up a turn in conversation, because they have been taught the importance of weighing their words carefully before speaking. In mainstream Canadian society, where intonations and short pauses between turns are the norm, this practice can result in First Nations children seeming to have nothing to say. Also, in an effort to listen carefully to what is being said to them, First Nations children may not make eye contact with their interlocutors, a practice which may be seriously misunderstood, for example, as being distracted or disrespectful. Anishnaabek S-LP Peltier (2010) explains that, within the Anishinaabe oral tradition, listening is valued more than talking because knowledge-keepers and language-keepers pass historical and cultural information on to the younger generations orally through stories and teachings, and younger people are expected to remember their words. Peltier speculates that because of this oral teaching and learning tradition, children's careful listening may involve processing and holistic meaning-making on the listener's part such that they are not only processing language input at cognitive (thinking) and physical (hearing) levels, but also emotionally (heart-mind connection) and spiritually (knowing that words are an expression of the speaker's spirit and the power that they possess). As she notes, this takes time. Many of the distinctive discourse features noted in the study of dialects and generally described by participants in the current study are also highlighted in the literature on Native American English discourse (Basso, 1970; Damico, 1983; Leap, 1993; Neha, 2003; Phillips, 1983). Crago (1992), reflecting on her observations of Inuit language communities in the north, warns that "practitioners who are ignorant of, or refuse to alter their practices in ways that recognize the strength of cultural patterns of communicative interaction can, in fact, be asserting the hegemony of the mainstream culture and can thereby contribute, often unknowingly, to a form of cultural genocide of non-mainstream communicative practices" (p. 37).

First Nations parents, grandparents, and Elders stressed the equal importance of children learning their Indigenous language, concurrent with learning English. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) explained that language is central to how First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children gain access to cultural knowledge and learn to participate and grow within their cultures: without their Indigenous language, their culture of origin could be lost, because it is impossible to translate the deeper meanings of words and concepts into the languages of other cultures. Unlike other groups in Canada for whom

English or French is not their heritage language, Aboriginal people do not have the option to look to another country of origin to reclaim their language. Canada is home to 11 Indigenous language families and over 60 distinct Indigenous languages. All of these are at risk of extinction within this century (Norris, 2007) as a result of government language planning and policies that have actively opposed or neglected them. Incongruously, a basic value in Canada is that regardless of where children live, programs for promoting their optimal development should be accessible, available, and linguistically and culturally appropriate to them (Canadian Centre for Justice, 2001). However, there are few or possibly no S-LPs in Canada who are fluent in an Indigenous language. The lack of S-LPs who could provide services in an Indigenous language or who could support the development of bilingual Indigenous-English communication skills is not unique to Indigenous language groups. In a recent survey, more than half of 384 S-LPs surveyed reported not being able to speak the language(s) of their client (D'Souza, Kay-Raining Bird, & Deacon, 2012). Nevertheless, the situation for Indigenous languages and for Indigenous children's success is particularly dire: investments in culturally appropriate supports for optimal language development of young First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children are relevant to a range of policy areas, including reparations for colonial government policies that have resulted in socioeconomic impoverishment and linguistic erosion among Indigenous Peoples, community development, education, literacy, and employment.

With most Indigenous children in Canada now learning English or French as their first language, one might assume that Indigenous children would not experience difficulties attributable to language mismatches at school. In fact, language-based challenges appear to figure prominently among the many contributors that may account for the high rate of identification of Indigenous children in Canada as having learning difficulties and the persisting high rate of early school leaving. First, there are still communities where a majority of Indigenous children learn an Indigenous language but are forced to start school in English or French with no bridging program. For example, in the north-eastern region of the country, 35% of Innu children in Labrador never attend school, a trend that, according to Philpott (2006), is partly due to having to face being plunged into an alien cultural, environment, and language of instruction. Second, there appear to be many First Nations children, especially in rural and remote communities, who speak a variant of English that is sufficiently distinctive to warrant recognition as a non-Standard (from the perspective of public

schooling) English dialect. This creates communication difficulties for children, their teachers, and peers. Third, and related to dialect, the pragmatics of communication in some Indigenous families and communities, such as some features described by participants in the current study, may be very much at odds with the discourse expectations of teachers, other parents, and children in institutions of the dominant culture including public schools. Several Canadian investigators have reported unique difficulties confronting children who start kindergarten speaking a language or dialect different from the language of instruction (Crago, 1990; Wright, Taylor & Macarthur, 2000).

All these scenarios can create low self-esteem, cultural identity confusion and conflict, difficulties for Indigenous parents wanting to accompany their children in their journeys through formal education, lack of engagement in formal education, and lack of responsiveness to S-LP services that may be available. A process of engagement between an S-LP, a child's primary caregiver(s), and preschool or primary teachers is needed so that all parties are aware of the family's priorities regarding first and second language learning, potential advantages and drawbacks for a particular child to pursue bilingual learning at various points in their developmental and educational trajectory, and potential resources to support bilingual learning if this is of critical importance to the parent and child.

Elders, grandparents, and parents affirmed the potential for non-Indigenous providers to meet service needs, as long as they create conditions for cultural safety and take into account parents', grandparents', and Elders' goals for children's early learning and development. This point is illustrated in the report by Zeidler (2011) of successful practice by non-Indigenous service professionals in a First Nations community founded on initial investments in building trusting relationships and understanding local goals for child, family, and community development.

Although a S-LP may not speak an Indigenous language or dialect, an S-LP could be prepared to support First Nations children by understanding the ways their early language socialization is likely to influence their proficiency in various aspects of communication, interests, attention, memory, story-telling, social interactions, and responses to pedagogical techniques. S-LPs could potentially play a supportive role with Indigenous language speakers aiming to teach their language to a child. For example, S-LPs could share their knowledge of language acquisition when the usual exposure to the language is not working sufficiently well for the child, and their knowledge of bi/

multilingual learning. However, the meanings conveyed by any language go beyond its component phonemes and morphemes, and many First Nations people are concerned that the deep and often spiritual meanings of their languages are being lost by efforts to find one-to-one correspondences between Indigenous and English vocabulary, grammar, and story-telling (Peltier, 2010). An important role S-LPs can play in regards to the strong value placed on Indigenous language learning voiced by First Nations people is to act as an ally by advocating for official recognition of Indigenous languages and investment in language maintenance and revitalization efforts driven by Indigenous people.

The views expressed by Elders, grandparents, and parents in the current study may be useful as a general point of reference when developing activities to support early language development of First Nations young children. However, as noted, there is much diversity across and within First Nations cultures, communities, and families and assumptions cannot be made on the basis of any study, and this creates challenges for S-LPs to develop culturally appropriate and effective practices. As well, there are disproportionate numbers of First Nations children living in non-Aboriginal foster and adoptive homes, and the goals and preferences of these non-Aboriginal caregivers must also be understood (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2004). There are increasing numbers of programs in Canada that encourage and assist non-Aboriginal guardians to nurture connections between First Nations children and their home communities, cultures, and languages (e.g., *Surrounded by Cedar*, n.d.). Those working with children to support their language development must have the means to learn about the values, practices, and potential roles of all of the people who are playing significant roles in regards to the language and communication development of their children. Questions such as the ones asked in the interviews for the current study can be used by those involved in supporting children's early language development to learn about the views of the family members they are working with to help shape the services they provide.

Two of the interviewers in this study were S-LPs who had worked in the communities where they conducted interviews, including one interviewer who was a First Nations person from the local community herself. Both interviewers were surprised by how much they learned about the families who they interviewed that would be useful to them in delivering better services. A conversational interview could be followed by observing the interaction patterns that naturally occur in a family,

in order to identify patterns that successfully support the skills that could be strengthened in order to pursue goals that are part of an agreed upon speech language facilitation plan. An important criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of initiatives to support Indigenous children's language and literacy may be the extent to which they support culturally-based language socialization practices.

The findings of this study reinforce the call by many Aboriginal leaders to invest in strengthening the capacity of First Nations people to deliver programs and professional services and to train First Nations community members in allied fields, such as early childhood education, infant development, and community health, to work collaboratively with S-LPs. Community-based practitioners such as early childhood educators, health representatives, and teachers are often well-positioned to identify core features of language socialization, to understand the contexts of child development and care in the community, and to offer insights to S-LPs about the conditions, needs, and goals of a family or community. A recent survey by SAC (2011) found that about half of the professionals who responded to the survey provided some kind of training to community members, community-based support staff, or paraprofessionals. The ethics and the prospective utility of collaborative, strengths-based approaches to promoting speech-language development have been demonstrated by cross-cultural investigators (Ball 2003; Crago, 1992; Johnston & Wong, 2002; van Kleeck, 1994).

In this emerging practice, the current study indicates the importance of including, where possible, Elders as well as other older, extended family members in efforts to create a culturally- congruent, family-centred approach to speech-language facilitation, assessment, or intervention. While the Indian residential school movement and other colonial interventions greatly constrained the guiding roles of Elders that were once central to First Nations child rearing and language acquisition, the current healing movement that implicates both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people aims to revitalize this core aspect of First Nations culture. Elders' involvement can be particularly helpful to S-LPs working with young children because Elders understand the foundation role and specific features of their culturally-based oral tradition and of community discourse practices that are vital to maintaining cultural beliefs, practices, and languages (Peltier, 2010). S-LPs can offer their support as allies in this healing movement as well as in their work with individual children. Finally, there is a need for more research to explore the diversity and identify similarities in First Nations

values, priorities, and practices regarding children's speech and language development, and to identify resources within First Nations communities that could be harnessed in collaborative approaches to meeting a child's needs in ways that are congruent with the goals, needs, and language heritage of their parents and grandparents.

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End Notes

¹Elders are typically holders of traditional cultural knowledge. Not all elderly community members are designated as 'Elders.'

²This distribution meant that the sample disproportionately represented rural dwellers, compared to slightly more urban than rural dwellers in the overall population of First Nations in Canada.

³Typically, children start saying their first words by about 12 months of age and nearly all of children's speech is understandable by 48-60 months of age (Chapman, 2000).

⁴Participation frameworks are the expectations underlying who can acceptably say something, when, and about what.

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Appendix 1. Elder, Grandparent, and Parent Views on Learning to Talk in Childhood

Note: *The purpose of this study is to learn about how to support language development of Indigenous preschool children in ways that Indigenous Peoples think is best. To do this we are seeking the views of Indigenous Elders, grandparents, and parents with young children.*

This type of study is important because it will provide a resource for use by Indigenous communities and others to know more about how Indigenous Elders, grandparents, and parents view their children's language development. It will lead to more understanding about how Indigenous Elders and parents think about:

- *how children learn language*
- *how to support children's learning of language*
- *the role of the Mother Tongue and English in their children's learning.*
- *what Indigenous Elders and parents think are strengths and challenges to their children's language learning.*

Overall, it will lead to greater understanding of what Indigenous Elders, grandparents, and parents think their children need to lay the groundwork for their later learning.

Demographic information

1. How old are your children?
2. How old are your grandchildren?
3. What community do you live in?
4. Do you describe the community you live in as urban or rural?
5. Do you live more of your time on or off a reserve?
6. What is your mother tongue (i.e., the language of your ancestors?)
7. What language(s) do you use most of the time?
8. What language(s) do your children use most of the time?

Views Regarding Language Development of Young Children

Notes:

- *The term 'young' refers to babies and children from birth to 5 years old*
 - *First language learning follows a developmental progression. The next set of questions has been written to learn about how Indigenous Elders, grandparents, and parents believe young children learn and develop their first language.*
 - *Please think about the language most frequently used by your child or the children you are thinking about when answering these questions.*
9. Thinking about childhood, do you think children learn starting from birth and throughout their early years, or does learning really start when they go to school, or what do you think about the timing of children's learning?
 10. What do you think are some of the most important kinds of learning that babies and young children do BEFORE they start going to school?
 11. What do you think are the most important things that influence whether babies and young children learn all they can before going to school?
 12. What do you think are the best ways to help young children in your community to learn?

Learning to communicate with words is part of what babies and young children learn in their early years

13. At what age do you think a child begins to develop the capacity to talk?
14. Do you think that children need help learning to talk?
15. How do you think babies and young children learn to talk?
16. Is there any age when you would become concerned that a child is not talking at all?
17. If so, at what age?
18. How do you think babies and young children learn to understand words?
19. Do you think that young children need help learning to understand words?

‘Talkative’ is defined as talking a lot when one is engaged with other people.

‘Quiet’ is defined as talking little when one is engaged with other people.

20. Would you prefer that your child(ren) learn to be ‘more on the side of talkative’ or ‘more on the side of quiet’ or do you have any preference? Why?
21. Are there certain situations in which you would like your child(ren) to be talkative? If yes, what are they?
22. Are there certain situations in which you would like your child(ren) to be quiet? If yes, what are they?
23. As a parent, do you think it is your role to be talkative with your child and actively try to encourage your child to be talkative and learn lots of words, or do you think it is your role to be quieter and actively try to encourage your child to be observant without asking many questions or needing to talk a lot?

Views regarding young children’s learning in their Mother Tongue and/or English

Note: The term ‘young’ refers to babies and children from birth to 5 years old

24. Do you think it is more important for young children’s learning to occur in their Mother Tongue, English or both Mother Tongue and English (or something else)? Why?
25. Would you like to see more opportunities to help young children’s learning in their Mother Tongue? How might this be done?
26. If there were programs to support young children’s learning in your community, would you like them to be conducted only in your Mother Tongue, only English or both (or some other combination)? If another combination what is it?
27. Do you think that the kindergarten and grade 1 classes where children in your community start school should include instruction only in your Mother Tongue, only English or both (or some other combination)? If another combination what is it?

Programs to support language development of young children in your community

Note: The term ‘young’ refers to babies and children from birth to 5 years old

28. Have you accessed any services around early childhood development?
29. If yes, what were the services?
30. Were there some things that you liked about the services?
31. Were there some things you didn’t like about them?
32. If you didn’t access such services, why not?
33. Are there programs that you would like to have in your community to support young children’s learning? What kinds of programs?
34. Are there programs you would like to have in your community specifically to get children ready to start school? What kinds of programs?
35. What would make you want to use those programs if they were available?
36. Do you think that programs in your community to give young children opportunities for learning need to be better?
37. What would make them better?
38. How can a non-Indigenous person work with Indigenous children to support language development of any language?
39. Can you think of a non-Indigenous teacher who you think made a positive contribution? What is it that made that person someone you valued and respected?
40. What actions would be most helpful in supporting Indigenous Peoples develop their own ways for supporting young children’s learning?