



First Nations and Métis Early Literacy and Language Enrichment Program



Programme d'enrichissement précoce de littératie et du langage chez les Premières nations et les Métis

KEY WORDS
FIRST NATIONS
METIS
NARRATIVES
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CLASSROOM-BASED
LANGUAGE INTERVENTION

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Abstract

This article describes a pilot intervention program that was specifically developed to address perceived areas of weakness in the early literacy abilities of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children using a culturally adapted curriculum. The program arose as a result of a need identified by a school division in Northern Alberta to address concerns that children from First Nation and Métis backgrounds entering school were less prepared to develop reading skills than their non-Aboriginal peers. Teachers and principals indicated that young Aboriginal students did not begin school with the readiness skills required for success in the classroom. The school division contracted with Khan Communication Services, Inc. to implement a language enrichment program targeting children in the early elementary grades that would ensure that all children were equally prepared for the development of literacy skills and would be more likely to achieve reading success in higher grades. This article describes the program and presents preliminary outcome data. The findings resulted in the continuation and expansion of the program to all elementary schools in the School Division.

Abrégé

Cet article décrit un programme pilote d'intervention qui fut spécifiquement développé pour traiter des domaines perçus de faiblesse dans les habiletés précoces de littératie chez des enfants des Premières nations, Métis et Inuit utilisant un programme d'étude culturellement adapté. Le programme est né d'un besoin identifié par une division d'école du Nord de l'Alberta de répondre à des inquiétudes à l'effet que des enfants provenant de Premières nations et de familles Métis entraînent à l'école moins préparés à développer des habiletés de lecture que leurs pairs non autochtones. Les enseignants et directeurs avaient indiqué que les jeunes élèves autochtones n'avaient pas commencé l'école avec la préparation nécessaire pour réussir en classe.

La division scolaire a accordé un contrat à Khan Communication Services Inc. pour mettre en œuvre un programme d'enrichissement du langage qui s'adressait aux enfants des premiers niveaux du primaire et qui garantirait que tous les enfants seraient également préparés à développer des habiletés en littératie et auraient plus de probabilités de réussir en lecture dans les classes plus avancées. Cet article décrit le programme et présente des données préliminaires de résultats. Les conclusions ont eu pour résultat la continuation et l'expansion du programme à toutes les écoles primaires de la division scolaire.

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Introduction

Children of First Nations and Métis background are often reported to arrive at school without having developed some of the underlying skills that are necessary for the acquisition of literacy (Peltier, 2010). This may in part be the result of differing language socialization practices in Aboriginal communities and in schools (Johnston & Wong, 2002). Khan Communication Services Inc. has had an extensive and on-going relationship with a school division in northern Alberta that serves First Nations and Métis children. Discussions with principals and teachers in the division schools confirmed concerns regarding the academic readiness skills of some of the young First Nation and Métis children they taught. The First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Early Literacy and Language Enrichment Project (FNMI-ELLEP) was designed in response to such concerns. The FNMI-ELLEP is a classroom based intervention program that was developed in response to these concerns.

The goal of the FNMI-ELLEP program was to enhance students' early literacy and language skills within a classroom setting in order to successfully meet curriculum expectations. Narrative language and phonological awareness abilities develop substantially in the early school age years and are positively correlated with academic performance (Brand, 2006; McCabe & Bliss, 2003; Rice, Hadley, & Alexander, 1993). In addition, story-telling is an important part of many Aboriginal cultures and was therefore considered to be a culturally appropriate vehicle for language learning for Aboriginal children. Therefore, the specific focus of the program was to develop student's narrative language and phonological awareness abilities.

The FNMI-ELLEP was developed by a speech-language pathologist from Khan Communication Services Inc. and implemented by teachers in kindergarten and grade one classrooms at two schools in northern Alberta, Canada. A total of nine teachers participated in this project; three kindergarten teachers and six grade one teachers. All but one first year kindergarten teacher had over five years of teaching experience. Most of the teachers had participated in cultural training experiences that involved elders coming to the school and talking about First Nations culture. None of the teachers were of First Nations or Métis descent.

Testing

Narrative and phonological awareness skills were tested. Speech-language pathologists pre-tested all children in the target classrooms who received parental consent and were either First Nations or Métis or were identified by teachers as either having average skills or being at academic

risk. A total of 55 students in Kindergarten and grade one, ranging in age from 4 to 7 years were pre-tested. However, the School Division stipulated that, for the initial analysis of the effectiveness of the FNMI-ELLEP program only 15 students (6 in School A and 9 in School B; 16% of all children who participated in the program) were to be tested over time. However, during the course of the year, two children moved away, one child stopped coming to school and one child passed away in a tragic car accident. The 11 remaining students completed both pre- and post-testing in the areas of weakness (story-telling or phonological awareness or both). Three of the eleven children partook in the pre- and post-test of the ENNI only. Three others participated in the phonological awareness pre- and post-test only. Five out of the eleven children participated in both the ENNI and the phonological awareness pre- and post-test measures.

The 11 children who participated in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the program at pre- and post-testing were all of FNMI or Metis heritage. All 11 scored below age-level expectations on the measures of narrative ability ($n = 8$) and/or rhyming skills ($n = 8$) described below, at pre-test. Two of these children were diagnosed with speech and language difficulties. One had a severe expressive language delay (Child G) and the other a severe phonological and expressive language delay (Child F).

Narrative testing. Children's narrative abilities were tested using the *Edmonton Narrative Norms Instrument (ENNI; Schneider, Dubé, & Hayward, 2005)*. The ENNI was normed on 300 typically developing children in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. It assesses story telling skills in four- to nine-year-old children. The child tells a series of three stories to an examiner by looking at a sequence of pictures that portray each story. Stories include the same characters and are told in a pre-determined order. The stories are transcribed and a variety of micro- and macro-structural measures can be derived from the transcription. Since the focus of the classroom intervention was on improving a student's ability to recall and retell events in a story, a single measure was of interest for the present purposes; the story grammar score. This is a measure of a story's episodic structure. A scoring rubric is used to assess the child's ability to include characters, setting information, problems and their resolutions, and emotional reactions of characters to events in the stories. A score of 0 - 1 or 0 - 2 is allotted to each set of story components and a total raw score is derived. This is then converted to a standard score.

In addition, teachers were trained to collect data on the ability of the target children to retell a story during class in November and May using a criterion-referenced scoring

sheet (see Appendix A). The maximum score for this measure was 10. Teachers scored the children on-line as they told a story, rather than from a recording.

Phonological awareness testing. Phonological Awareness skills were assessed using two subtests of the *Phonological Assessment Test (PAT)* (Robertson & Salter, 2007), namely Identifying Rhymes and Producing Rhymes. Rhyming was the skill selected to be assessed because rhyming is the first in a hierarchy of phonological awareness skills developed by young children (Johnson & Roseman, 2003).

Training and Program Implementation

After pre-testing, each school received three in-services, three classroom demonstrations, and two parent workshops. The in-services were given in October, February and April of the 2010 - 2011 school year. All training was provided by a speech-language pathologist from Khan Communication Services Inc. The teacher in-services were provided in each school to the grade one and kindergarten teachers. Teachers were also provided time to discuss how to connect program strategies and goals to curriculum expectations.

Teacher In-services. The first in-service took place in October of 2010 in each school. All participating kindergarten and grade one teachers in the school took part in the two and a half hour in-service. The purpose of this initial in-service was to provide teachers with training on how to teach narrative and phonological awareness skills in the classroom. During this in-service, the results of the screenings were also shared and training was provided on how to target goals and collect data on each student's progress.

The following strategies, designed to support the use of stories in a classroom setting, were taught to teachers:

1. Give explicit instructions on how to listen and act out a story together.
2. Act out parts of the story with the class
3. Act out the full story using everyone in the class
4. Use visuals (i.e. puppets, props) to encourage interest in stories
5. Take pictures of the story re-tell – beginning, middle and end then use the pictures for sequencing and re-tell
6. Video-tape the story and then watch it on another day
7. Introduce new vocabulary

8. Use a story in a repetitive way to work on syntax
9. Track children who are having trouble following directions
10. Highlight the elements of a story (i.e. character, setting, problem, outcome)
11. Encourage classroom discussions about the story using visuals of story elements
12. Ask questions that reflect on how a child can relate to the story
13. Use guided reading as a time to work on re-telling narratives
14. Visualize parts of the story and create drawings about the story
15. Use illustrations from a story to build vocabulary
16. Pre-teach vocabulary in the book through use of smart board technology

The program was intended to provide opportunities for all children in a classroom to participate in story-telling events. Teachers were shown how to present stories using three general presentation styles: teacher presentation and students listening (presentation), teacher presentation + limited student participation (partial presentation), and full student participation (full participation). Descriptions of these three participation styles with examples are provided in Table 1.

Teachers were taught how to target the following phonological awareness and letter knowledge skills: rhyming, segmenting words and sentences, identifying sounds in words, and matching letters to sounds. These skills were often targeted in drumming sessions where rhythm and movement activities were embedded into routines. The program book "Sounds Abounds" by Lenchner and Podhajski (1998) was introduced as a resource. In addition, the teachers received cards through a private web forum with phonological awareness activities that they could incorporate into their lessons (ABC recipe, Khan Communications Inc.).

To facilitate teachers' understanding of how to use both narratives and phonological awareness activities in the classroom, the acronym DRUM was introduced. The DRUM model is illustrated in Figure 1. In the centre of the circle is the target of the learning task. The target could be phoneme segmentation, letter identification, or telling a story. The "Do" refers to getting children on their feet and involved in

Table 1. Participation styles presented as part of teacher in services associated with the FNMI-ELLI program

Presentation Style

- Read a story from a book
- Give the children something to listen for (i.e. problem)
- Highlight vocabulary to talk about after

Partial Participation

- The children are required to participate as story tellers
- Read parts of a sentence and stop to let the class finish the sentence (i.e. brown bear, brown bear what do you -----)
- Stop and ask the class questions: why do you think the gingerbread man keeps running away? (include predicting questions)
- Give the children roles (your job is to say “what do you see?”)
- Ask the children questions after the story

Full Participation

- All children participate
- Children play characters and/or the set in a story
- Use of manipulatives: props, puppets (i.e. stick puppets)
- Children can be involved in making the manipulatives as part of a craft project

Visualization

- Read a highly visual with no pictures story (The Faraway Tree Stories by Enid Blyton was read to the teachers in the in-service)
- Encourage the children to create mental pictures of the story while listening to the story
- Have the children draw an element of the story after listening
- We added visualization after each story regardless of presentation style
- Ways to help a child visualize if they could not was demonstrated
- Use illustrations from a story to create vocabulary lists

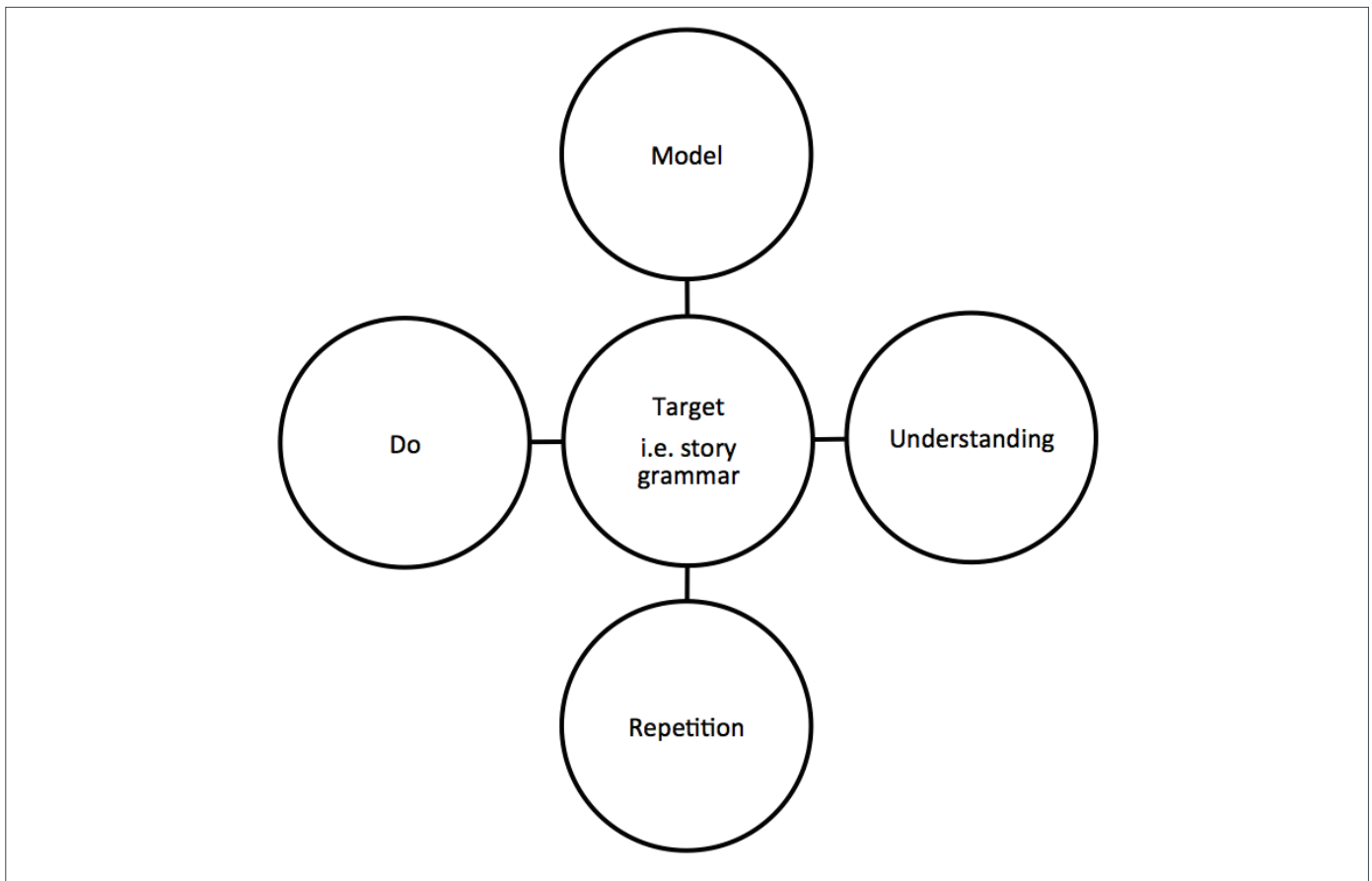


Figure 1. Elements of the DRUM model

the task, for example by acting out a story or stomping out the phonemes in a word. Repetition exposes the child to the learning task multiple times in the day. Repetition of the target can be built into activities and routines through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities. For example, a teacher read a story from a book, acted out the story, and created some centres around the story to repeat the information and develop retelling skills. Understanding refers to extending the knowledge of the target to different contexts and relating the target to similar concepts and activities (e.g., telling about personal experiences related to a story plot, asking wh- questions about a story, identifying the same phoneme in the beginning, middle or end of words). Modeling is when we demonstrate the skill that we want the child to learn. In this regard, demonstrating the wrong (as well as the right) way of doing things was encouraged as a way to put the children in the role of “teacher”. For example, showing a poor listening position for a story and having the children coach the teacher on how to be “ready” for the story. Another example would be to put appropriate affect

into the story telling to model effective body language and voice quality.

The second teacher in-service was held in February, 2011. In this in-service, the data teachers collected was reviewed with teachers in each school as a group and goals were revised based on students’ progress. If needed, teachers were given suggestions on how to collect data more frequently in the classroom.

The third teacher in-service was held in April, 2011. In this in-service teachers discussed the benefits and the challenges of the program. Further suggestions were provided by the speech-language pathologist on how to further incorporate program goals using strategies that were easily embedded in each classroom. An evaluation of teacher’s impressions of the program was conducted at this time by the speech-language pathologist. At the School A, questions were presented to the group whereas at School B the questions were asked individually.

Classroom Demonstrations. The speech language pathologist demonstrated how to target goals in classroom activities three times during the school year. The purpose of these sessions was to demonstrate to teachers how speech and language goals relate to the classroom curriculum and how they can be targeted in general classroom routines with all the children integrated together in a repetitive, fun way. Strategies were demonstrated during daily lessons in kindergarten and Grade one classes. Elements of Métis and First Nation culture were incorporated into these sessions and teachers were encouraged to do the same. For example, during a drumming session focusing upon phonological awareness skills, the children moved to the syllables in words (e.g., ea-gle). Each time the drumming stopped, the children did an activity focusing on the last word (e.g., children made a statue of an eagle). Classroom demonstrations also focused on facilitating children's story comprehension and story-telling skills. The speech-language pathologist demonstrated how to encourage full participation from students. Decorative props were used as a way to incorporate different learning styles (i.e. visual, tactile, and experimental). Visualization of the story was also introduced as a strategy to increase comprehension, especially in children having difficulty processing auditory information. Tracking progress while a child presented a story was also modeled to the teachers.

Parent In-services. Two parent in-services were scheduled at each school in October, 2010 and April, 2011. The purpose of these workshops was to train parents on how to incorporate early literacy skills throughout daily routines in the home. The first parent in-service focused on reviewing the link between oral language and early literacy. In this workshop the speech language pathologist also helped parents develop a list of literacy activities to complete at home. The second in-service reviewed other elements of reading skills and language development (i.e. predicting, visualizing parts of a story, and sequencing), and how to target these skills in exercises at home.

Additional supports. Teachers consulted with the speech-language pathologist individually as needed using a private secured forum on the Khan Communication Services Inc. website. Each teacher logged in to obtain information and post questions for the speech-language pathologist. The speech-language pathologist provided regular updates on the forum including specific suggestions for each classroom.

As part of the program, teachers also met one afternoon without the speech-language pathologist to discuss how to connect the goals and strategies of the program to the curriculum. This meeting between the teachers proved

crucial for developing support for the program. Teachers became more interested in participating and using the program and strategies when they were able to make direct links to the curriculum.

Evidence for Effectiveness of Program

As stated previously, only 11 children were pre- and post-tested by a speech-language pathologist using standardized measures. Eight of the 11 children had pre-test scores below age-level expectations in pre-test on the ENNI story grammar measure. Figure 2 presents individual standard scores, pre- and post-test results, for these eight children. The mean of the standard score for five year olds is 7.7 with a standard deviation of 2.78 (Child B and Child D). The mean for six year old children is 9.32 with a standard deviation of 1.46 (Children A, C, E, F, G, H). [Note that the children remain consistent in all of the graphs; that is, Child B is the same child in every graph.] The results show a substantial increase in all eight children's ability to formulate a narrative from pictures using the story grammar elements modeled in the intervention. Child F and Child H were the two children with diagnosed language impairments; both improved in their story grammar scores over the year (although some of this improvement for Child F may have been from daily speech therapy to improve intelligibility). Figure 3 shows the results of teachers' in class evaluations of story grammar abilities using the criterion-referenced measure presented in Appendix A for the same seven out of eight children (One child is missing due to lack of data from one teacher). Once again, all seven children showed gains on this measure.

Three of the 11 children being followed longitudinally did not have pre- and post-test measures for story grammar because their pre-test scores on the ENNI were within the average range and therefore narrative abilities were not an identified goal for them. Therefore, data for these three children are not presented in Figures 2 and 3. These three children did experience difficulty with phonological awareness tasks in pre-test, however, and their data are presented along with the other five children who scored low at pretest on the phonological awareness tasks in Figure 4a and b. Figure 4 a and b presents percentile rank scores on the *Rhyming Identification* and *Rhyming Production* subtests of the *PAT* for eight children. According to the *PAT*, a percentile rank of 16 or less indicates a performance that is below age-level expectations. The highest percentile achievable is 80. Four of the eight children improved in their ability to identify and produce rhymes. Two additional children identified rhymes within normal limits at pretest and post-test, but improved in their ability to produce rhymes over the period of the intervention. All six children

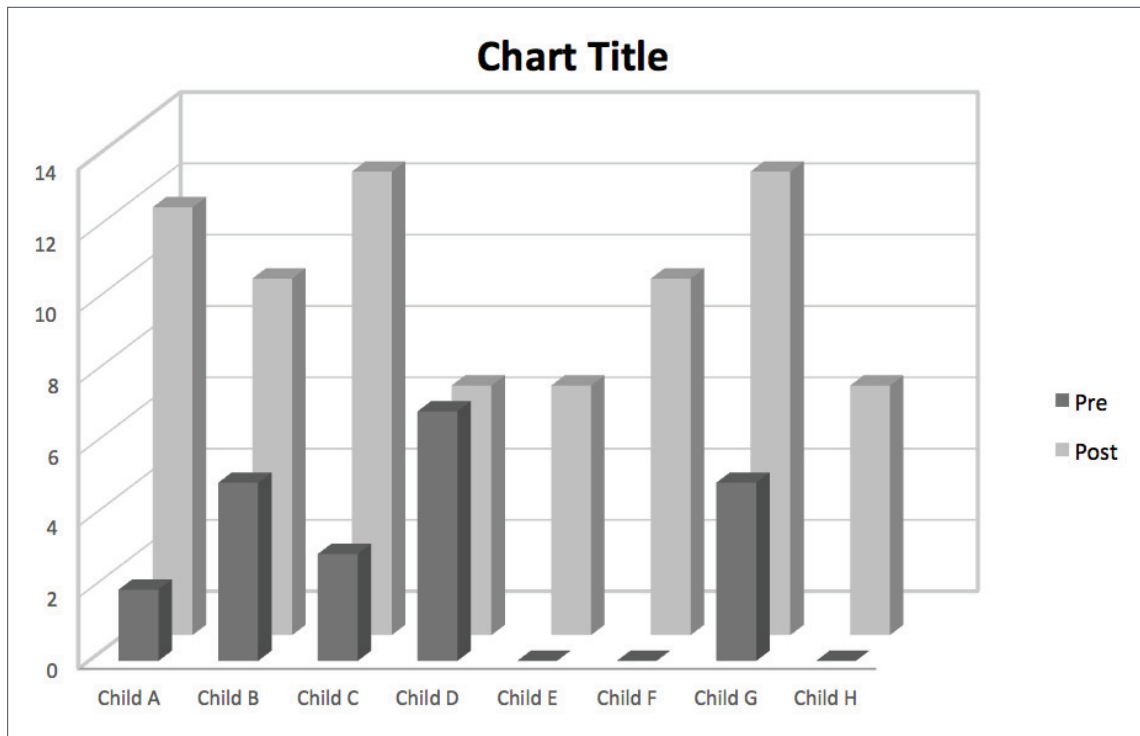


Figure 2. Pre- and Post-test ENNI story grammar scores (n = 8).

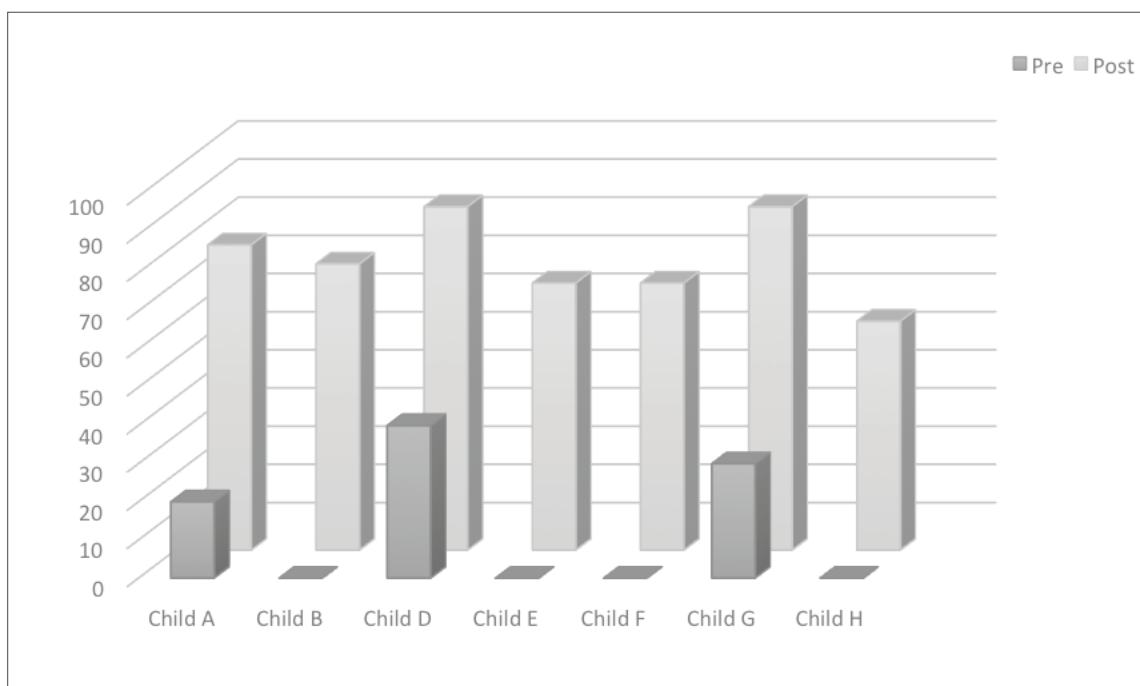


Figure 3. Pre- and post-test scores on a criterion-referenced measure of story grammar completed by the classroom teacher (n = 7).

who made progress in phonological awareness skills, measured using these rhyme tasks, achieved scores within the normal range at post-test on both the rhyming identification and producing tasks. Two children, Child F and Child H did not improve from pre-test to post-test on either rhyming task—these were the two children with diagnosed severe expressive language delays.

Teacher Participation and Feedback

Each of the nine participating teachers had a different comfort level with administering the program. Two of the nine teachers stated that they were not comfortable with facilitating story re-enactments in the classroom. One of these teachers did not perform any story re-enactments during the year and the other asked another staff member

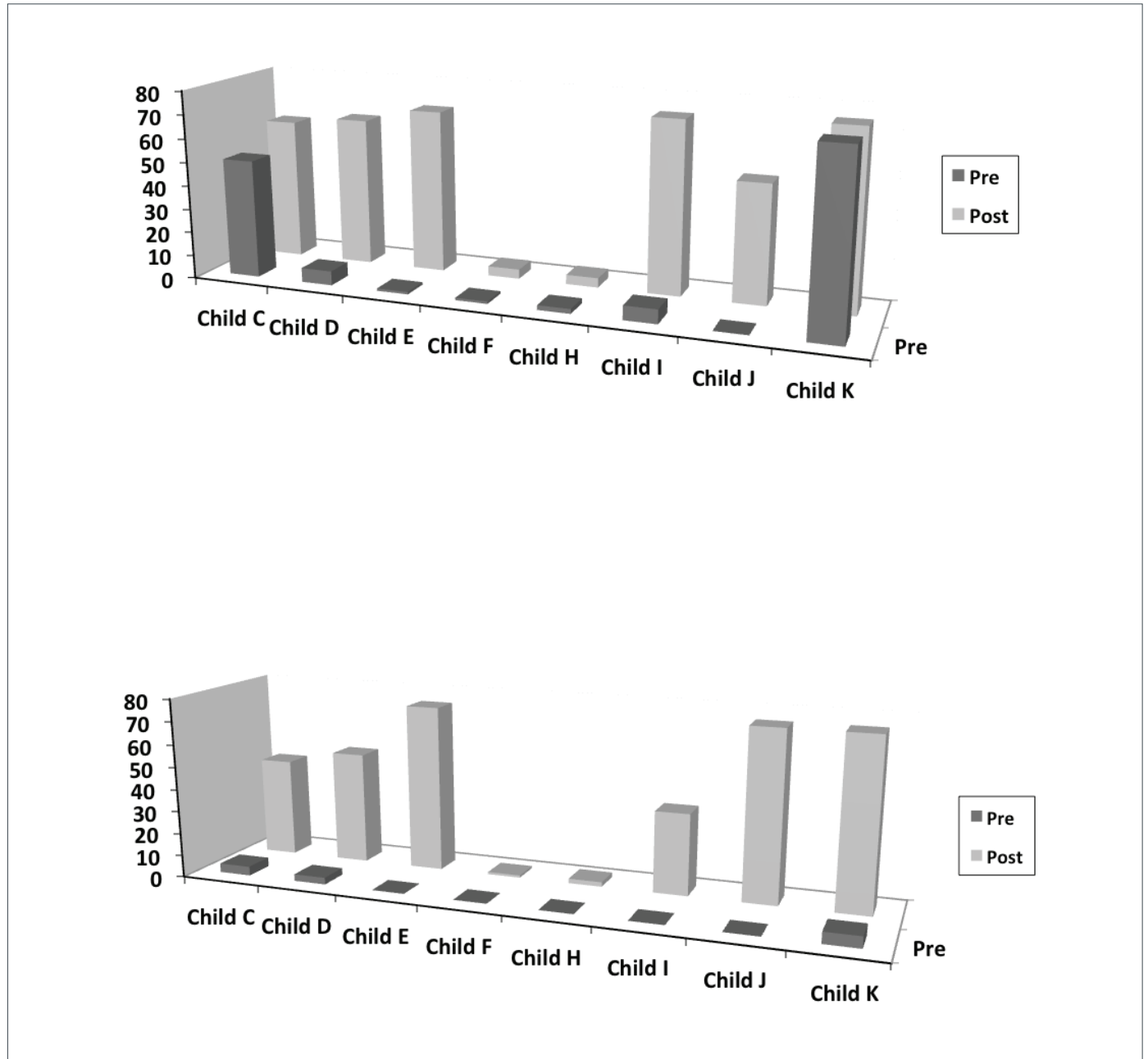


Figure 4 a, b. Pre- and post-test percentile ranks on Rhyming Identification and Rhyming Production subtests of the PAT (n = 8).

to lead story-retellings. All teachers were involved in data collection except one who collected only at the end of the year. Also, some teachers tracked progress with greater frequency than others. The speech pathologist noted through discussions that some teachers needed more encouragement and guidance regarding the importance of developing narrative skills and relating these skills to the classroom curriculum. Others appeared to understand the relationship readily. Selected teachers' responses to the questions asked in the third in-service are presented below.

1. What were the joys of participating in this project?
 - Challenged higher levels – weren't bored
 - Seeing student progress in phonological awareness skills and story retelling
 - Giggles – student enjoyment
 - Kids surprise you – got really involved in re-tells
 - Seeing the confidence build
 - Brought a more cognizant focus to the FMNI children in the class
 - More aware of cultural and linguistic differences
 - Attendance of FMNI parents to the parent night
2. What were the challenges?
 - Student absences and late attendance at school
 - Trying to balance all activities
 - Gathering the props
 - Keeping students with props on task
 - Re-telling without the visuals
 - Helped when the connection to curriculum was made
 - Taking data
 - Maintaining the approach throughout the year
3. What are the advantages of a multi-modal approach to the whole class?
 - More props (auditory and visual) = more engagement
 - More movement
 - Catches all levels of learners
 - Increases imagery
 - Engagement in learning, memory, and enthusiasm

The FNMI project is continuing and is currently in its fourth year. Some changes regarding program implementation have been observed over time. In the first year of the project, teachers reported that it was a challenge to collect data. However, by the second year of the program the same teachers reported feeling more confident collecting data and implementing the program activities. In the fourth year, data collection was demonstrated with more explicit cuing instructions (when does a child's comment count as independent?).

Each teacher has incorporated ideas from the program into their own teaching styles. For example, one kindergarten teacher has incorporated technology by using the app "Pictello" into the intervention approach. Children illustrated the beginning, middle, and end of a story. Then they recorded the story with the pictures using the Pictello on the iPad. The story was then played on the smart board for the entire class while the teacher was able to mark the story grammar units. This teacher improved in her ability to collect data on children's story telling abilities over the two years of the program.

Discussion

The goal of the FNMI-Early Literacy and Language Enrichment program was to provide participating children with enriched language experiences that allow them to attain the readiness skills required to meet curriculum expectations without removing them from the classroom. The language skills focused upon were narrative and phonological awareness skills. The goals and many of the strategies introduced in the classroom-based intervention program are used by speech pathologists in inclusive settings and are related to later academic success and literacy skill development.

The data presented in this article are preliminary at best and establishing the effectiveness of the program awaits more rigorous methods. Nonetheless, the pre-post ENNI scores demonstrated that some children improved their narrative and phonological awareness skills after participating in the program for one school year. What is not clear is whether the improvements can be directly attributed to the program they experienced. Maturation and the impact of other activities in the classroom may account for the changes observed. In the future, it will be important to study the effectiveness of this program more rigorously with a larger number of children and with an age-matched comparison group that does not receive this intervention.

The participating teachers commented that they benefited from the project. Some of these benefits appear

important, for example the reported ability of teachers to incorporate story-telling and phonological awareness activities into the classroom setting. To this end, it appeared that teachers appreciated being provided with time to meet together to discuss curriculum connections with the program. This part of the program may have helped teachers to consolidate the link between narrative and phonological awareness activities and curricular expectations.

The program was delivered in the classroom. Classroom based interventions that do not single out individuals who are experiencing difficulty are considered particularly beneficial and suitable for children of Aboriginal backgrounds (Crago, 1992). In addition, the use of oral narratives, whole class learning, and experiential learning—essential parts of the program—have been identified as culturally relevant practices for First Nations and Métis students (Ball, 2007). Several teachers mentioned that they became more aware of the First Nations and Metis children in the classroom. They felt that they checked in more often with these students. Therefore the conversation around First Nation education provided through the program may have led to more individual attention of First Nation and Metis children in the classroom and sensitivity and incorporation of aspects of Aboriginal culture into the curriculum.

Future Directions

The FNMI Language Enrichment and Phonological Awareness Program was initiated by a School Division in northern Alberta to provide kindergarten and Grade 1 students with language enriched programming in their classrooms so that all children might have the opportunity to enhance their pre-literacy skills. In order to determine if this program leads to reading success, reading measures of students in the program should be compared to peers not receiving the intervention over time. As the program expands, such additional data will be collected.

At the end of year one, teacher evaluations indicated that teachers felt the role of the speech-language pathologist was of great importance, and they requested an increase in the number of classroom demonstrations. At the time of this writing, the school division had increased this part of the program to four demonstrations per year, and it is expected that participation of the speech language pathologists in the classroom will continue to increase over time.

In the first year the program used stories that were based on a Euro American sense of story elements. By the

second year stories from First Nations and Métis cultures such as “The Beginning of Creation” by Anderson (1982) and the “Jingle Dancer” by Leitich Smith, Van Wright, C., & Ying-Hwa (2000) were included in the program. As the program expands, more activities and stories from First Nation and Métis communities will be included.

Conclusion

A whole classroom approach to language development and literacy using repetition, experiential learning, oral language, and shared experiences was implemented. Preliminary findings suggest that this approach was embraced by teachers and enjoyed by students. Future studies will examine its effectiveness in providing a means for developing narrative and phonological awareness skills for all children in a class, including those at risk and those with language impairments.

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APPENDIX A

Retelling Scoring Form

Name: _____

A check mark demonstrates independent proficiency
 Note: Open ended prompts are not counted as a prompt (i.e. And then what happened)
 P – required prompting
 AQ – had to be asked the question

Elements	Prompts	Date: Title:	Date: Title:	Date: Title:	Date: Title:	Date: Title:	Date: Title:
Beginning	Mentions initial event. How does the story begin?						
Setting	Mentions setting. Where does the story happen?						
Characters	Mentions one character (not a pronoun)						
	Mentions another character (not a pronoun)						
	Mentions feelings of character. How did that make him feel?						
Problem	Mentions problem. What is one important problem in the story?						
	Referents are clear (pronouns used are easy to follow)						
Middle (Sequence)	Mentions one other event (in sequence)						
	Mentions an additional event (in proper sequence)						
End	Mentions the outcome. What happened at the end?						
Level of Prompting	High Medium Low Total	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Interpreting the Points

8-10 - Skilled

Complete, Detailed – Good thorough Retell

5-7 - Developing

Partial Retell - A few more details would make it easier to follow

0 – 4 – Needs Work

Retelling Very Difficult to Follow, Inaccurate or Unwilling to Retell a Story