

The Atlantic Aboriginal Economic Development Integrated Research Program

LIFE LONG LEARNING – FROM YOUTH TO ELDER

Train the Trainer : A Family Literacy Program for Aboriginal Families in Atlantic Canada

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Introduction

Literacy is no longer defined as merely the ability to read. Rather, the concept encompasses written communication, comprehension, and the ability to use information to function in our daily lives. Literacy skills in our society today are becoming increasingly important as they increase job opportunities and earning power to support oneself, family and community (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2005; Province of Prince Edward Island 1999). When parents find reading and literacy activities challenging, it is difficult for children in that family to achieve a high level of literacy (Timmons, 2001). Children who experience early literacy difficulties continue to struggle throughout their educational careers (McCoach, O'Connell, Reis, and Levitt, 2006). Willms (2002) also cites a number of studies worldwide consistently showing that family influences on student achievement outweigh the effects of either school or community.

The statistics on the educational levels of Aboriginal people in Canada indicate that on all accounts Aboriginal people are placed well below the average rates of performance of other Canadians. Battiste (2002) emphasizes, "as diverse as Indigenous peoples are in Canada and beyond, so also are their ways of knowing and learning" (p.14). Some Aboriginal children are taught by their Elders through ceremonies, stories, and traditional teachings. Stories serve as a medium for both entertainment and knowledge exchange (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2001; Chambers, 1989).

The majority of literacy interventions have been school based and have had little effect on the reduction of the cycle of low literacy and poverty in many rural communities. An approach that is presenting an alternative is family literacy intervention. Family literacy programs seek to enhance the literacy of both generations through participation of family members in a coordinated literacy program (Handel, 1999).

Family literacy programs provide parents with strategies on how to work with their children. Programs designed for Aboriginal communities work effectively to change cycles of poverty, low literacy, and unemployment by supporting parents in nurturing literacy skills with their children.

By hiring and training Aboriginal trainers/facilitators to implement the program in their own communities, the *Train the Trainer: Aboriginal Family Literacy Program* works towards building capacity within Aboriginal Communities. Parents acquire skills related to literacy development which improves their ability to support their children in all educational experiences. Furthermore, it is positively impacting these communities by supporting the revival and help sustain Aboriginal heritage and culture through language and literacy.



Program Particulars

Families Learning Together: Program Development

The initial module development for this comprehensive family literacy program began in families homes during the pilot of the *Family Literacy program for Mi'kmaq Communities in Atlantic Canada Project* that took place in 2004. It included elders and community members. This strategy proved to be successful, incorporating families' opinions of the program. Since the Pilot project, the resources have been adapted and improved and a *Train the Trainer* Manual has also been developed in this way to aid facilitators in training others in the future.

Aboriginal Family Literacy Modules

- Module 1: Reading In and Around Your Home
- Module 2: Nature ~ Fluency
- Module 3: Oral Histories
- Module 4: Valuing Cultural Diversity and Respect
- Module 5: Animals ~ Comprehension
- Module 6: Aboriginal Pride and Culture ~ Guided reading and word recognition
- Module 7: Motivating Children to Read Using the Medicine Wheel
- Module 8: Homework
- Module 9: Decoding and Phonics
- Module 10: Parenting and Discipline

Methodology

- Pre and post reading assessments are carried out on all children to measure the impact of the program. *Note: the WIAT assessment tool is not normed on Aboriginal Populations (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2004) Therefore, this assessment was used only to measure the increase or decrease of literacy levels, and is not used to place or grade children.*
- The design of the program is the direct-adult/direct child approach with parent and child time at the end of each session. Sessions are held once a week for 10 weeks, on a night decided by the families.
- One module is presented each night and each session is 1.5 hours in length.
- Reading materials are specific to culture and interests of the families in Aboriginal communities.
- Babysitting and healthy snacks are provided for the families participating in the program.

Literacy Program Pilot Results

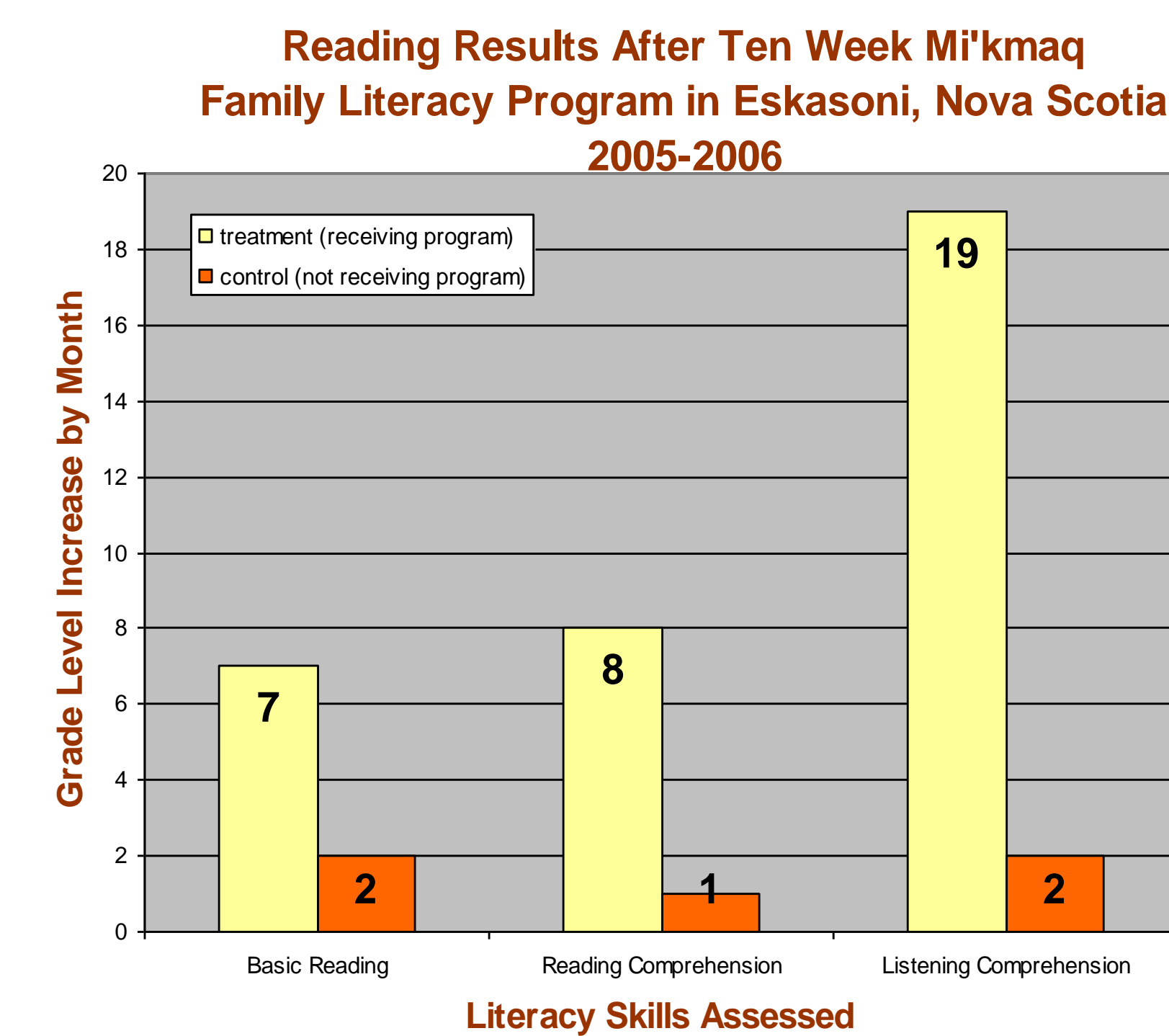
The pilot process engaged the families in the development of the program as well as the implementation. Participatory action research was integral to assuring the program is relevant to the families and their culture.

Community members from Eskasoni, NS embraced this program and made plans to host it in 2005-2006. Ten families participated in the program from September – December, 2005 (the initial offering of the program) and the subsequent ten families were identified as a delayed treatment group to serve as a control. These families participated in a second program from January – March, 2006.

Results:

Children of families participating in the 10-week program (in the Fall) advanced the equivalent of more than seven months of a year in their basic reading skills, compared with an advancement of two months in the control group (who had not yet participated in the program); and realized a gain of more than eight months in reading comprehension, compared with slightly more than one month for the control group. Listening comprehension soared: nearly two years' growth over the 10 weeks, compared with close to two and a half months for the control group.

These successful results were demonstrated by both groups of children who participated in the program. Both groups experienced overall significant reading gains (more than the expected norm of 6 months increase) since September, proving that the program was indeed effective in enhancing literacy within these Mi'kmaq children's lives. (See figure below)



Where We Are Today

The Train the Trainer: Aboriginal Family Literacy Research Project is currently running in three Atlantic Canadian Communities – Eskasoni, NS, Wagmatcook, NS, and Conne River, NL. The research has also expanded to include a program running in Calgary and Fort McMurray, AB.

We are in the middle of the program and are still in the data collection stages in the communities. From the qualitative data we have received to date, the program has been well received by families and facilitators.

Here is what parents have to say:

"My child's reading improved a lot. When my child started this course she was having difficulty reading books but now she wants to read all the time."

"I really enjoyed the program, and spending time with my child and other parents."

Children enjoyed it too:

"It was fun!"

"I know more words!"

"When I read a book I learned chickens were related to the dinosaurs!"



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