

## **Engaging First Nations children in summer learning**

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Literacy research reveals that early literacy and reading skills are related to and are strong predictors of later reading ability and success in school (Lonigan, Purpura, Wilson, Walker, & Clancy-Menchetti, 2013; Lonigan, Schatschneider, & Westberg 2008). Our competence in these skills affects us socially, emotionally and physically. In 2012, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) showed that 17% of Canadian working-age adults (16-65) have very poor literacy skills (Hayes, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2013). These individuals may be unable to, for example, determine the correct amount of medicine to give a child from information printed on the bottle. A staggering 32% of Canadian adults have poor literacy skills and can deal with materials and tasks that are simple, clearly laid out, and not too complex (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008a). This group of adults may have developed coping strategies to deal with daily routines and other literacy demands but they may have difficulty with novel tasks (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008a; Hayes, 2013). Although these are adult literacy levels, literacy development begins at birth, and so begin the trajectories of vulnerability for academic challenges. The time to prevent low literacy skills is in the early years (Carroll, Bowyer-Crane, Duff, Hulme, & Snowling, 2011).

The importance of properly acquiring literacy skills is especially critical in the early years. Children who continue to struggle with reading by the end of Grade 3 are more likely to

have detrimental effects long term (i.e., more likely to drop out of high school, poor health, lower income). This emphasizes the importance of high-quality education and intervention programs early on, and particularly for children at-risk of reading difficulties.

Research shows that the Aboriginal population is at a higher risk than the non-Aboriginal population of low literacy levels, and scholars have attributed this to factors such as colonialism, racism, unemployment and low education levels (Hoffman-Goetz, Donelle, & Ahmed, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2013). How can we as a society help Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children at-risk of, or who have, reading difficulties, overcome this challenge? In the next few pages, we describe the gaps in this field of research and the issue of summer learning loss (SLL). We propose one method that may help close the gap between children who struggle with reading and their peers. This paper provides a brief introduction to Flanagan's Master's thesis project that involved designing a summer literacy program with the aim of engaging First Nations children in summer learning. We conclude the paper by briefly describing this program.

Most literacy intervention research accounts for interventions while children are in school, either during school hours or after school. More research focus is needed on interventions outside of the school year. Davies and Aurini (2013) described three non-school environments that play a role in all children's school and reading achievement: years prior to school entry, exposure to activities after school, and summer vacation. Once children have started preschool, the largest gap children experience away from school is during the summer, which is typically two months long. Summer is a time when many children

lose or forget skills they learned during the school year; this is typically reported in reading and math skills (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008b; Heyns, 1987). This concept is known as SLL. Cooper and colleagues (1996) found that SLL, on average, was equal to losing one month of school instruction, and they also identified extreme examples of individuals who lost two to three months of school instruction. Learning loss over the summer is likely to be greater for children from families of low socioeconomic status (SES) and children who have low achievement scores (Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000). This reading achievement gap widens considerably during the summer (Cooper et al., 1996).

SLL not only forces teachers to spend significant class time in the fall reviewing previously learned and forgotten material, as opposed to teaching new material, but also the cumulative effects of SLL are likely to increase the achievement gap found between less-advantaged children and their peers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007; Cooper et al., 1996; Stanat, Becker, Baumert, Lüdtke, & Eckhardt, 2012). The term *less-advantaged* refers to children from low SES families, children with a language or reading disability, second-language learners, and children who have low academic achievement.

We propose one method to help reduce learning loss for children during the summer months by introducing summer programming and interventions that focus on targeted skills. Summer learning programs have led to significant positive outcomes for children of all grade levels (Cooper et al., 2000; Pechous, 2012; Schacter, 2003), and even more so for less-advantaged children and children from earlier grades (Alexander et al., 2007; Heyns, 1987; McCombs et al., 2011; Stanat et al.,

2012). Summer programs have reduced SLL and, in some cases, have led to learning gains, increased confidence, and increased self-esteem (Council of Ontario Directors of Education, 2011).

There is some research that has quantifiably measured the effects of summer literacy programming (Pechous, 2012; Schacter, 2003); however, from this limited selection of studies, there is a lack of systematic literacy intervention research with Aboriginal people, and specifically those living on-reserve (who were not included in the PIAAC survey, for example). There is limited research that investigates reading programs designed for Aboriginal children, and generally, children showed improvements in literacy outcomes after the program (Phillips, Norris, & Steffler, 2007; Timmons & O'Donoghue, 2006; Walton, Bowden, Kurtz & Angus, 2001; Walton, Canaday, & Dixon, 2010). However, these are not summer programs. Frontier College (2013) is one of the few programs that delivers Aboriginal summer literacy camps. This program is used in 83 communities across Canada, serving 5,800 Aboriginal children ranging in age from 5 to 16 years. The program is evaluated qualitatively through surveys administered to children, parents, staff and teachers, and results have been positive.

To address the needs identified in the literature, we designed a study investigating the effects of a summer literacy program in two First Nation communities. The Master's student, Flanagan, is a non-Aboriginal person and therefore had much to learn about both communities who wanted to be apart of this research. She spent much time preparing for this project; this involved reading some of the literature about First Nations history, she spent time with an elder, visited the communities involved in this research and worked closely with the principals,

literacy specialists, and parents from the schools involved. This was an important step in building a trusting relationship and getting to know the community.

Flanagan personally recalls experiencing summer learning loss, despite attending summer programming throughout her younger years. This learning loss was obvious at the beginning of the new school year when teachers spent a couple of weeks reviewing concepts mastered in the spring. Flanagan is an experienced summer camp counselor and was a volunteer tutor for two reading programs in New Brunswick. These experiences, plus having access to a research-based instructional framework, gave her the tools necessary to design and lead a summer literacy program.

The authors were given the opportunity to work with First Nation on-reserve schools from multiple Canadian provinces through a First Nations literacy initiative named Confident Learners. Confident Learners is an early-years program designed to develop the reading skills of young children in First Nation schools. The summer literacy program Flanagan designed is independent from Confident Learners; however, the program used Confident Learner's instructional framework and some of the activities they developed.

*Splish, Splash and Learn* is the name of the summer literacy program Flanagan designed through consultation and collaboration with various First Nations people. Flanagan (2015) delivered and piloted the program in two First Nation on-reserve communities in New Brunswick. We received letters of support from the community school principals (one of which is First Nations) and a letter of support from the communities' Chief and

Education Director. The program was an English-language program and this was decided upon by the principals. The program was two-weeks long, five half days a week. In total, there was at least 16 hours spent practicing letter knowledge and phonological awareness skills. Considering the theoretical and applied research conducted on summer learning, literacy programs during the summer may be an enjoyable, and arguably effective, way for children to engage in literacy activities in the summer. Although literacy programs have been found to prevent or lessen learning loss and enable learning gains, more research is necessary to understand the benefits of such programs in the context of SLL in First Nations children.

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