

# Primary School Language Intervention – A Window of Opportunity

## École Alex Wright School, Nipawin

Teachers in a rural primary school were concerned about the growing number of students entering their school with delays in language development. Children experiencing language delay have difficulty understanding the meaning of what they hear and expressing their desires, needs or thoughts to others. The teachers recognized that the primary grades offer an important opportunity to help these children overcome challenges that may affect their success in school and later life. Determined to use this “window of opportunity”, they developed an action research project focussed on finding effective ways for the school to assist and teach children who demonstrate language delay.

The school served approximately 230 students in kindergarten to grade two, offering classes in both English and French immersion. It had a highly transient student population with a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. On entering the school, students were screened in the areas of speech, language, hearing and vision. Additional information that might help classroom teachers to meet each child’s needs was gathered through the referral of some students for an in-depth assessment by an optometrist, ophthalmologist, ear, nose and throat specialist, audiologist, speech and language pathologist or educational psychologist. If a weakness was suspected in any area, parents were contacted and a personal program was planned for the child.



Principal Linda Spice and teacher Laurie Parbst acted as contacts for the four-year, school-wide McDowell project.

As a research team, the teachers examined literature about language development, tried new teaching strategies in the classroom and worked to strengthen language programs with new resources. Several practical programs were implemented:

1. An extended readiness program to ease the transition from kindergarten to grade one for students who had not yet developed the necessary language skills.
2. School-wide levelling of books to support a school-wide individualized reading program.
3. A home reading program that allowed parents to participate in their child’s daily practice of reading.
4. A preschool parent education program that helped parents to support their children in

making the transition to school life and established the importance of education.

5. A project to develop story bags that provide literacy experiences for kindergarten children and their families.

Throughout the project, information about the effect of language interventions was compiled and shared through teacher journals, classroom observations, monthly network meetings, videos, audio tapes, anecdotal records, checklists, rating scales, informal reading inventories and curriculum-based assessments. Several students were designated as case studies for intensive data gathering over the four-year life of the project. The objective in sifting through the data was to assist the teachers in effectively supporting and teaching children who experience language delay.

After much reflection and discussion, the researchers decided to summarize what was learned in a practical handbook that could be shared with other elementary school teachers. The main focus of the handbook is a series of integrated language lessons that were found to be effective with students. It also contains a student profile drawn from a case study, references, sample day plans, and information about the school's extended readiness program. Although copyright considerations frequently limited what could be included, the handbook became a tangible product of the school's wide-ranging, four-year investigation.

## Conclusions

The four-year time frame for the research created some problems because of student transience, the overwhelming amount of data collected, and the challenge of maintaining staff focus and enthusiasm for the project. However, it also allowed the staff to branch off into explorations of new areas related to the school's overall vision. The researchers identified numerous benefits stemming from their research:

- Development of numerous practical programs related to language intervention.
- Support and recognition for the project from community and outside agencies.
- Local and provincial recognition for the school and individuals involved in the project.

- A professional development focus for the school around literacy and language development.
- Impetus for individual staff members to undertake their own professional studies.



A student is introduced to the books of author Lois Ehlert (top). Two students participate in school reading activities.

*"It is our responsibility as early childhood educators to promote the importance of learning in the early years. We need to inform all educators, social agencies, government officials, and community members about this optimal stage of learning. We can make a difference in the lives of our young children that will have long term effects and ultimately benefit society as a whole."*