

Please mind the gaps:
What we don't know about young Aboriginal children's
language and literacy development
and how to get over it

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Quality of life gaps result in sub-optimal development

Inequitable access to supports for optimal health and development

- Housing > mold > recurrent otitis media, asthma > early hearing loss
- Lack of early screening, diagnosis, timely intervention
- 18% access to quality early childhood development programs (Leitch report, 2008)
- Lack of accessible, culturally relevant, culturally safe early literacy programs
- Significant gaps in school readiness (Can. Council on Learning, 2007)
- Significant shortfalls in academic achievement (Mendelson, 2008)



Quality of Life affects Opportunities for Optimal Development

Speech and language development is foundational to literacy (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001)

Language is a predictor of success in school (Bird & Akerman, 2005)

Education is a determinant of many other outcomes over the lifecourse.

Filling the gaps:

Policy reforms and F/P/T investments to improve QoL for young Aboriginal children!



Knowledge gaps

While population of Aboriginal young children is growing exponentially, a literature search yielded NO reports of

- successfully completed empirical studies assessing their language development (e.g., age norms, prevalence of atypical conditions & patterns)
- controlled studies evaluating outcomes of early language support programs or early interventions.

Not included in NLSCY, no large sample in UEY

Aboriginal Children's Survey (Stats Can) will yield survey data

RHS data and Aboriginal Head Start practitioners report speech-language services for children a top priority



Filling knowledge gaps

- Community-based research on promising practices.
- Aboriginal Children's Survey data to characterize trajectories for language acquisition and to estimate service use.
- Increase accessibility of culturally competent Speech Language screening, diagnostic and early intervention services.



Gaps in transmission of heritage mother tongue

Children's acquisition of heritage mother tongue is a goal for many Aboriginal parents.

Gaps in understanding the learning processes that support mother-tongue based bilingual language learning.

Gaps in supply of fully fluent speakers.

Gaps in research on increasingly popular immersion/submersion programs (some exceptions: Usbourne, Crago, Taylor et al. with Inuktitut speakers).

“Bridging” the gap in English or French to prepare children for mainstream schooling undermines the goals of heritage language pre-schooling.



Filling gaps in heritage language acquisition

Heritage language maintenance programs throughout school

In-service for educators about dual language learning approaches

Community education about dual language and how to support it.

Encourage parents, grandparents to use home language

(e.g., Toronto School District DVD)



Different pathways: Gaps in understanding

Varieties of language acquisition among Aboriginal young children

Dialects (or *registers*) of English or French (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008)

Semilingualism: partial learning of more than one language or dialect
(Cummins, 2002)

Culturally-based differences in language use and communication styles so that
Aboriginal young children may seem less verbally fluent than they are
(Heath, 1983; Van Kleeck, 1994)

Differences can be interpreted as *deficits* that need to be remediated (e.g.,
learning impairment pull out programs, ESL)

or as “*pathologies*” that need to be treated (e.g., SLP)



Filling gaps in understanding

Training for teachers & SLPs on normative varieties of language

(e.g., UBC Audiology and Speech Sciences grad course)

English as a Second Dialect policies, funding, and in-service

on how to use ESD effectively (e.g., Friesen, Gosnell, et al. CJSLA '09)

Culturally appropriate screening and diagnostic tools (Johnston et al. UBC)



Beyond filling gaps: A holistic approach

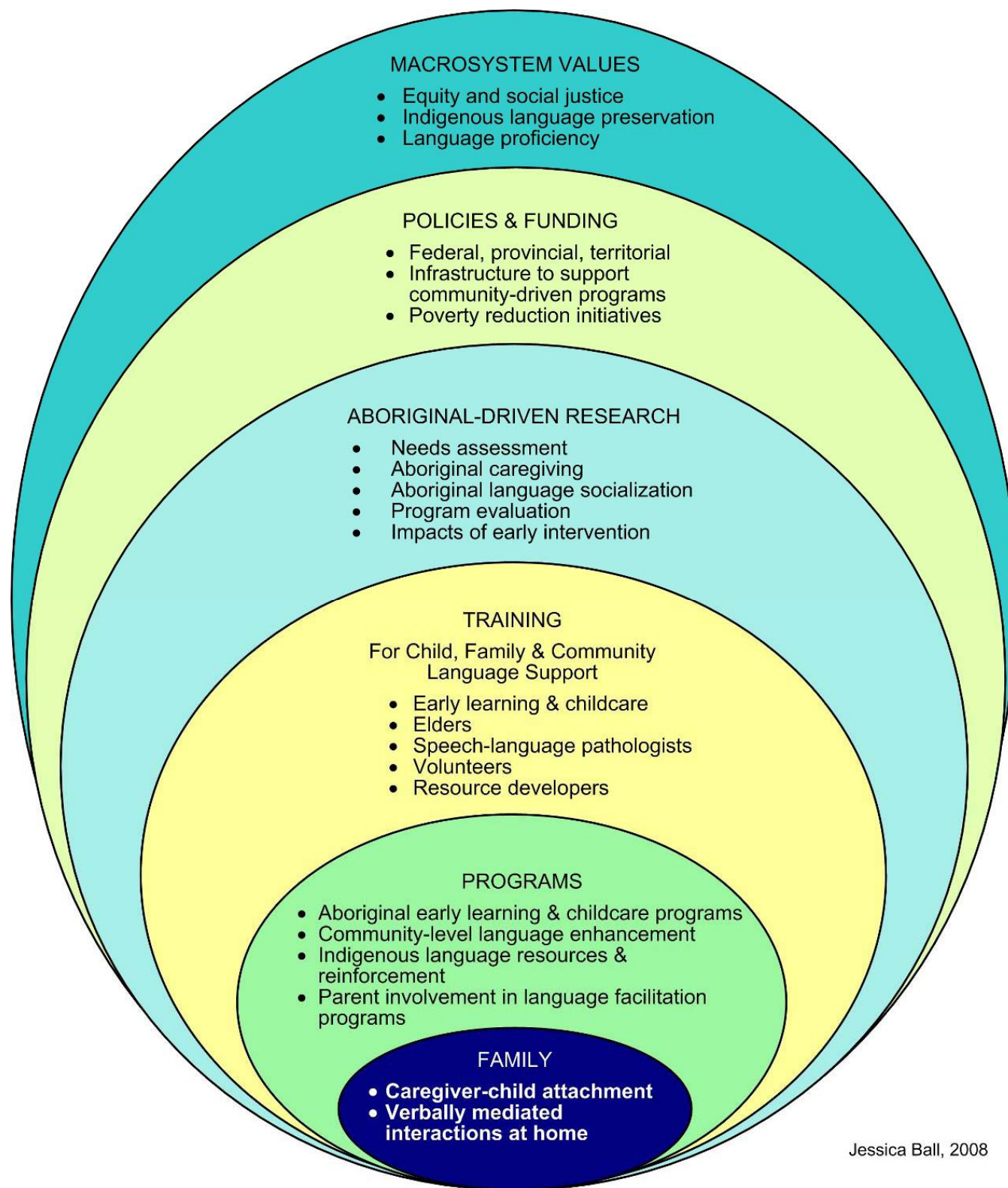
- Work first with families as the hearth and heart of speech and language.
- Support home language
- Expand access to quality early childhood development programs.
- Introduce language facilitation and early intervention on site.
- Support language diversity:
- Dual language ECE and school programs that promote heritage language development and maintenance.



A holistic approach

- Develop culturally appropriate speech-language diagnosis and therapy when needed, including on reserve!!
- Promote policy reforms to ensure healthy housing, nutrition, parenting supports (e.g., prevent hearing loss, ensure early nutrition, timely medical treatment)
- Invest in a strategic research program: what works for who, under what conditions?





Watch for it!

Canadian Journal of Speech and Language Pathology and Audiology

- 2 special issues on First Nations speech, language, and audiology, focusing on children's development and promising practices

Summer and Fall, 2009!!!



Find out more
Visit www.ecdip.org/earlylanguage
www.ecdip.org/dialects

