

WHAT WORKS?

Research into Practice

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Research Monograph #45

How can schools support First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) students in literacy success?

Fostering Literacy Success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Students

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A NOTE ABOUT FNMI

FNMI refers to the First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples of Canada. Within these three, distinct nations exist many other distinct groups, each with its own languages, worldviews, customs, ceremonies and histories. Often the word Aboriginal is used to describe these nations; however, this term has been rejected by many political organizations representing these communities. Aboriginal is often perceived as a colonial and homogenizing term, and its use assumes that these nations are all one group. Conversely, the application of the acronym FNMI promotes awareness of the unique character of these different communities, many of which are currently in a process of self-identification and cultural reclamation. For teachers, it underscores the importance of learning about, connecting with and ideally partnering with each FNMI student's home community.

Questions for Reflection

This *What Works?* explores the key issues, factors and strategies that support literacy success for FNMI students in schools. The discussion is guided by two key questions:

1. How can educators cultivate a literacy environment that fosters identity and respectful bilingualism?
2. What are the literacy practices that support FNMI students in schools, and why are these critical to learner confidence and success?

Embracing a Bilingual Approach

Literacy success rates for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students are currently measured by their acquisition of standard English and/or French, reflecting the languages of the Ontario curriculum. Because FNMI students often communicate in non-standard forms of English and/or French with their own unique nuances, they often encounter challenges in the standard languages.¹ For these students, literacy success is cultivated by individualized programs that support their identity, experiences and relationships with the world.² Literacy programs for these learners must, therefore, offer differentiated instruction, make real-life connections and involve strategies and resources that are engaging, motivating and culturally affirming.

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It is critical, then, for educators to embrace a respectful, bilingual approach that recognizes that students may, as part of their everyday existence, speak non-standard English and/or French (also called FNMI dialects or English/French as a second dialect).³ Often, cultural and community nuances of a particular Nation are embedded and expressed in these dialects. Therefore, literacy methods in schools need to use a bilingual approach that respects and values this uniqueness.

Speech language pathologist and respected Ojibwe educator Sharla Peltier (2009) writes that ESL programs “are intended to help achieve quick assimilation into the mainstream ... and to establish proficiency in the dominant language” (p. 3).⁴ This underlying approach can be viewed as contraindicated to ensuring that FNMI students’ sense of cultural identity is nurtured and facilitated. In contrast, bilingual literacy programs in schools foster an environment where distinct dialects (and cultures) are validated, while still respectfully developing a plan for mastery of standard English and/or French.

Learners from First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities should be exposed to a variety of communicative contexts and experiences that enable them to master code switching. This will provide them with tools for learning how to communicate and interact in a multitude of situations.⁵ Long-term, this ability and proficiency in more than one language will allow these students to live seamlessly in a bilingual/bicultural or multilingual/multicultural state. A classroom that honours FNMI learners will necessarily adopt a bilingual (or multilingual) approach to teaching standard English and/or French.⁶

Sharla Peltier (2009) states that educator “training regarding the nature of dialects and of second language learning ... [and] cross-cultural education ... is important to affect positive change in the classroom. ... Training programs should include current information so that Aboriginal children’s dialects are viewed as assets, and not obstacles to learning” (p. 6).⁴ Transparency is key. The students and their parents or guardians should be advised that the “language of the classroom” may be different from the “language spoken at home.” At the same time, it is critical that both languages are identified as important and valued.⁷

Literacy Practices that Support FNMI Students

Effective literacy strategies vary for each student and are dependent upon his or her location, self-identification, culture, language, community, experiences and levels in standard English and/or French. Their likely impact also depends upon the overall quality of the literacy program, as reflected in student supports and resources, the school and classroom environment and FNMI partnerships.⁸ However, research suggests that for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners, success in literacy⁹ is supported by a variety of “best practices,” as described below.

Form Partnerships with the FNMI Community.¹⁰

- Connect with your school board’s FNMI lead as your first step to developing partnerships. Alternatively, work with a native languages teacher in your board to make these connections or contact the Ontario Native Education Counselling Association at www.oneca.com; their district representative (FNMI education counsellor) can assist you by making suggestions and introductions.
- Develop critical relationships with the FNMI organizations and agencies in your area. They have access to programs and contacts like elders, Métis senators and cultural resource people.
- Learn a basic greeting in the language of the community you are working with. Support and resources are available from the language experts at the First Nations Languages Commission of Ontario at www.amolco.ca/.
- Find out what the protocols are for approaching elders/senators or cultural resource people to be guest speakers in your class. Some elders, for example, may require the gift of the sacred medicine tobacco to begin this relationship. Also, be prepared to offer an honorarium to these individuals (and their helpers) for their time.

Make literacy engaging and culturally affirming ...

“Get to know your students. How do they self-identify and what community do they originate from? What types of print, video, audio and other experiences motivate them?”

- Plan a field trip to a historical or cultural location. Visiting sites of importance to FNMI peoples is a learning experience that cannot be replicated in the class.

Develop individualized literacy programs.¹

- Get to know your students. How do they self-identify and from what community do they originate? What types of print, video, audio and other experiences motivate them?
- Appreciate and accept their nuances of non-standard English and/or French. What are their rules for social discourse (humour, sequence, use of silence) in literacy?
- Take the first six to eight weeks of school and listen to how FNMI students apply verbs, gender, word omissions and pronunciation. For example, many FNMI languages do not distinguish between he and she; they are gender neutral.
- Employ a balanced literacy environment and include FNMI resources and learning styles. Incorporate multiple intelligences and multiple literacies strategies.
- Include storytelling as a regular feature of your classroom.
- Provide many opportunities for group-talk, where students share informally and formally (e.g., think/pair/share, brainstorming, jigsaw, interviews).
- Facilitate sharing circles, using a *talking stone*. Set respectful ground rules by letting the class know that only the person holding the talking stone may speak. The rest of us have a responsibility to listen.
- Model and incorporate humour in your literacy program.

Provide engaging and motivating resources.

- Draw upon a variety of literacy resources that incorporate FNMI culture and language.
- Ensure that these resources represent the diversity and location of your students.
- Research the availability of FNMI literacy resources in your school, school board and community.
- Connect with www.goodminds.com, a First Nations owned bookstore and publishing house that offers a variety of authentic resources.

Classroom Books

- Bouchard, D. (2007). *I Am Raven*. More Than Words Books.
- Bourdeau-Waboose, J. (2002). *Skysisters*. Kids Can Press.
- Erdrich, L. (1999). *The Birchbark House*. Hyperion Books for Children.
- Ipellie, A. (2007). *The Inuit Thought of It – Amazing Artic Inventions*. Annick Press.
- Keoke, E.D. & Porterfield, K.M. (2002). *Encyclopedia of American Indian Contributions to the World: 15,000 Years of Inventions and Innovations*. Fitzhenry & Whiteside.
- Sockabasin, A. (2005). *Thanks to the Animals*. Tilbury House.
- Swamp, J. (1995). *Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message*. Lee and Low Books.

Professional Development

- Ministry of Education (2009). *Aboriginal Perspectives: A Guide to the Teacher's Toolkit*. Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Toulouse, P. *Achieving Aboriginal Student Success: A Guide for K to 8 Classrooms*, Portage & Main Press.
- Wiltse, L. (2011) "But My Students All Speak English": Ethical Research Issues of Aboriginal English. *TESL Canada Journal*, 28(5), 54-71.

Focus on early intervention in primary grades.¹¹

- Implement play-based programs that encourage oral language and opportunities to read, write, listen and present (valuing both non-standard and standard English and/or French).

Implications for Practice

Appreciate the nuances ...

"Take the first six to eight weeks of school and listen to how FNMI students apply verbs, gender, word omissions and pronunciation. For example, many FNMI languages do not distinguish between he and she; they are gender neutral."

Learn More about LNS Resources ...

Online:

www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/publications.html

Call:

416-325-2929
1-800-387-5514

Email:

LNS@ontario.ca

- Provide multiple opportunities for students to engage with and decode print in a variety of FNMI languages, thus ensuring that an array of FNMI books and stories are utilized as part of the regular curriculum.
- Set up listening and book centres that offer FNMI stories and songs.
- Create the *grandparent's chair* as part of your literacy program and invite First Nation or Inuit elders, Métis senators or other role models to come and share their teachings and/or craft.
- Partner with a local Reading with Pets program where students can share their books and stories with an animal that has been trained to work with children. This practice builds upon FNMI connections to Mother Earth and her children (animals, plants, other).

Make differentiated and real-world connections.

- Connect literacy to real-world experiences and vice versa. Have this become a springboard for a diversity of literacy activities.
- Plan a field trip or participate in a local FNMI play, festival, or powwow with your class. For example, plan activities to celebrate National Aboriginal Day (June 21).
- Read an FNMI book and ask students how this relates to their own lives.
- Try using FNMI languages as part of your transitions in the classroom.

In Sum

Learner success in literacy is cultivated in an environment that fosters confidence in the students' worldview (especially the culture of their Nation), personal identity, and experiences.¹⁴ Literacy programs in schools, therefore, need to be individualized (respectful of unique dialects), engaging, differentiated and supported by community partnerships and resources. The primary key to the literacy success of learners is the educator, who ultimately affects the quality and relevancy of the program.¹⁵ It is therefore critical that our teachers have the tools, resources, training, and supports to work effectively with these learners. First Nation, Métis and Inuit students' success, engagement, retention and graduation highly depend upon it.

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