



B.C. First Nations Head Start **Wrap the Elders Around the Children**

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FOR THE PAST 10 YEARS, THE COMMUNITY OF SPALLUMCHEEN HAS BEEN EXPERIMENTING WITH MANY DIFFERENT LANGUAGE INITIATIVES TO DOCUMENT AND RECAPTURE THE SECEPEMC LANGUAGE.

In 1999, a Splat-sin Language Assessment was completed and the results were unbelievable. With a population of 650+, there were only 23 fluent speakers left. Of these speakers, almost all were over the age of 66 and many have chronic health problems. It was a moment of awakening for our community to realize that something we had taken for granted was not going to be there forever if we didn't take immediate action. The language situation was deemed "critical" and one language authority told us that if we had less than 3% of our speakers left (which we did) that we should "just turn out the light" because there was no way to save our language.

We didn't agree. We stood up to a challenge and immediately developed a 12-year language revitalization plan. The first part of the plan was to train semi-fluent speakers who could become future teachers. They received much-needed help from Dr. Marianne Ignace and Simon Fraser University who assisted Spallumcheen to accredit a community-based language program that would teach students to read, write and speak their own dialect. Five students have gone through this program and three received certification for *First Nations Language Proficiency* from SFU.

Three of these students now assist at Splat-sin Child Care and have helped to deliver top quality language and culture programs. Rosalind Williams is the Cultural Teacher and Curriculum Developer (former Head Start coordinator), Anne Cook is the Language Teacher, and Marion Lee is the Spallumcheen Band Language and Culture Coordinator. Under the guidance of these three teachers, the child care's language and culture program has blossomed.

Splat-sin Child Care has been in full support of language revitalization and even provided space in the family room for the weekly language program. Every Monday, the grandmothers gather to help develop curriculum for the Splat-sin Head Start Program, to teach the language and to document the language. It is a great social time for the grandmothers and community. Splat-sin Child Care provides the space, the food, and assists with writing proposals to fundraise for the language.

Baby stepping toward “Language Nest” Immersion

Mondays from 10 – noon all of the children attend a Language and Cultural program with up to 12 grandmothers in our family room. A set curriculum consists of learning about numbers, colors, simple phrases, snack time, manners, prayers, exercises, games like tossing bean bags with the grandmothers while learning the phrases for throwing and catching, have play centres set up, expose the children to the language in its natural spoken form. The most successful component of this program is the interaction of our children and the grandmothers. Many children do not have grandmothers in their own homes, so this was new to them. In September, the children were reluctant to go near the grandmothers and now they have lots of fun with them and talk to them a lot.

It has helped to restore our traditional method of teaching, where grandparents were the primary teachers and care givers for our children and responsible to instill the language and culture in the children.

Rosalind sets up the curriculum for each week and purchases snacks for the children and Elders. Before each lesson, the grandmothers and Rosalind talk about what they are going to teach for the day and what support materials they will be using. After the lesson, the grandmothers talk about how it went and what could be improved for next lesson.

Total Physical Response Language Activities

Tuesdays to Fridays, Anne Cook does Total Physical Response in the Splantsin language with 3 – 6 year-olds for half an hour. She gets the children to do actions to remember the items and phrases they are learning. At the end of each week, she offers a mini-test to evaluate what the children have learned. Children get stickers daily and a prize at the end of the week. There is constant evaluation of this program, and it changes to suit the children's attention span and needs.

Music

We do drumming and singing with the children throughout the year. We teach them the Splantsin Name Place Song, the Family Song, the Deer Honor Song, as well as many other songs that were developed by Rosalind as part of the cultural curriculum. Once a week, we have a Splantsin community member come in and do music with the children. We have had loon calls, guitar playing, singing and drumming.

Name Giving

In May, we are planning a traditional “Name Giving Ceremony” for the children of our centre whose parents have made a formal request for them to receive an Indian name. The grandmothers have been observing our children since January and looking for characteristics the children present. They are looking back into the children's family trees for names that need to be brought forward. The grandmothers meet with the parents and discuss the child's personality, traditional family names, or contemporary names that relate to animals, flowers, water, earth, etc. The grandmothers suggest names and together with the parents decide on one. This will be the child's name.

The parents are working together to gather items to do a giveaway for the community people who come to witness the name-giving ceremony. They are sewing baskets, quilts and necklaces and gathering small items for the giveaway. They will also be making traditional headpieces for the children to wear at the ceremony.

The children will receive a wall plaque with their name on it and a blanket with their name embroidered on it. This is the first time our community has done this in over 50 years. We are bringing back a tradition that mainly used to rest in the family home and making it a community-wide celebration.

Over the past five years, we have tried many different ways to teach the language and culture to our children. We continually adapt it, change it, and try to find a way to make it work. We have developed friendships with language teachers in New Zealand who advised us to “wrap the elders around the children.” That’s what we are currently doing and it seems to be the only method that truly works for everyone involved.

As First Nations, we have to take control of our Head Start programs and ensure that language and culture are some of the most important aspects of our programming. We have a responsibility to ensure that our children are not only getting their school readiness skills, but their cultural identity as well. The first five years of life, being the most important formative years, are an opportune time to expose the children to their own language and culture.

Our goals for the future are to have more of our community members trained as ECEs to help us with our language and culture programs and to offer more immersion sessions with our grandmothers. The children and parents are in full support of our language programming and it has helped us to renew our community bonds and our collective responsibility to teach our children their heritage.

We actually view the language and culture as a component of school readiness. Studies have shown that children who have established a strong sense of identity have success throughout their school lives and have higher graduation rates. We have parents who have told us that what we teach at the centre has helped them to teach cultural things at home too, and has inspired some families to start hunting, drumming, traditions again.

On-going challenges

We receive funding under the “Daycare Enhancement Model” of Head Start. We find it a constant challenge to implement our language and culture component due to the provincial licensing requirements for our centre. Under our “Group Care License,” we must have licensed ECE staff on the floor. Unfortunately many of our own people do not have their ECE training.

Our funding pays for the enhancement of our programs, operating costs, and part of our staff wages. Due to the way we currently have our budgets set up, our language and culture programs are the last to get funded even though they are our first priority. A possible solution would be to change our “Model of Implementation” so that we can offer the type of “language nest” immersion programming we are moving towards. Our Society plans to study how this change would financially impact our overall operations before making that decision.

It is a challenge to incorporate the six Head Start components and still have programming time to do the language and culture programs. Children still need to have the educational readiness component that is mainly mainstream early childhood education-based.

The other challenge we face is cultural biases. Our non-native staff who are the primary caregivers of our children may be expected to stretch themselves beyond what their training as Early Childhood Educators prepared them for and they are expected to share our passion and understand why we feel it is so important to incorporate our Language and Culture into the day-to-day programming. Sometimes standard ECE theories and our own theories of how to teach our children are not in agreement. We are proud of our non-native staff who have extended themselves to support what we are trying to accomplish and for the program support they offer the children through the use of language master cards, posters, First Nations books, etc.

We will continue to forge ahead as we gingerly feel our way through the challenges we face to meet funding criteria and reporting, licensing requirements, program standards, political protocol, funding issues, intellectual property rights to protect Elders knowledge, policy development, development of culturally-relevant curriculum resources and programs, cross-cultural awareness, health issues, and the social and economic issues affecting the families within our communities. If we hold strong to the notion that as long as everything we try and every new detour we go around is, in the long run, "for the benefit of the children," we can't go too far wrong.

Deanna Cook and Rosalind Williams
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Resources

Handbook for Aboriginal Language Programming in B.C.

Intended to provide assistance to First Nations communities and organizations who want to design or expand their language programs. The 110-page handbook includes an extensive literature review, as well as suggestions and information related to implementing successful language programs. (\$15 by mail, or free download from FNEESC web site)

The Aboriginal Language Program Planning Workbook

A companion to the handbook (above). 65 pages. (\$10 by mail or free download from FNEESC web site).

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