

Oral Language Strategy for Aboriginal Education: Case Study Report

Keewatin-Patricia District School Board

Effective District-Wide Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy

1. Introduction

In Fall of 2003, the Ontario government launched a large-scale tri-level reform to raise student achievement in literacy and numeracy, specifically to see 75% of 12 year olds (Grade 6) reach proficiency in literacy and numeracy by 2008. “The starting point for reform was a five year period of limited improvement performance where the percentage of 12 year olds (Grade 6) achieving proficiency in literacy and numeracy was about 54%, based on the Province’s assessment as carried out by the independent agency, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO)” Campbell & Fullan, 2006, pg.1.

As part of the Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, research was (and continues to be) developed and conducted to support The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat’s commitment to research-informed practice. This case study report arose out of a larger project, conducted by The Secretariat’s research team, which began in the Summer of 2005. The project included an analysis of eight case studies of districts in Ontario that are achieving district-wide improvements in literacy and numeracy at the elementary school level. One of the districts chosen for observation was the Keewatin-Patricia District School Board (KPDSB).

It was during data collection that we learned of the district’s strategies and actions for literacy and numeracy improvement, the connections between the district and schools, the impact of the district’s strategies and actions at the classroom level, and the oral language strategy.

2. Board Profile

KPDSB initiated an Early Literacy Plan in September 2000. At the time, the district was scoring well below the provincial average on Grade 3 EQAO assessments. As the Board Improvement Plan was implemented year over year, a range of early assessment practices were developed to determine if students were reaching benchmarks along the way to Grade 3. It became apparent that many Aboriginal students, despite targeted attention and much support, were still not achieving the benchmarks that other students were now achieving.

Demographic Information

- The population of KPDSB is highly diverse, by Statistics Canada information it stands at 34% similar in composition to Toronto, Peel, and York Region District School Boards although the diversity is bi-cultural. Other northern boards are not at this level of diversity. Because of the large Aboriginal population north of KPDSB,

there is much movement from First Nations communities to the board's jurisdiction.

- A new self-identification policy, put into place Dec. 14th 2004, has provided accurate information regarding the number of Aboriginal students in the district's schools. KPDSB along with one of its co-terminus districts is the first district to be in a position to review the achievement of Aboriginal students.
- 35% of the student population at KPDSB is Aboriginal; in 1 pilot school visited the Aboriginal student population was 68%.
- Statistics Canada information also identifies KPDSB as the lowest socio-economic district in the province using factors of lone-parent families, high mobility rates, lack of high school diploma, unemployment and average family income.
- Despite the challenges of the above demographics, EQAO results have improved 27% in Grade 3 reading, 17% in Grade 3 writing and 22% in Grade 3 mathematics. "School makes a huge difference in the lives of our students." Janet Wilkinson, Director, KPDSB.

The Director and the system oral language SAT were determined to find an answer to the dilemma of an effective early literacy program that would meet the needs of Aboriginal students. KPDSB staff used Early Development Intervention (EDI) data to determine that many young Aboriginal students do not come to school with a level of oral language that would permit them to benefit from an early literacy program that focuses on reading and writing. These students lacked the foundational listening and speaking skills that are prerequisites to listening, speaking, reading and writing success in the classroom. As such, the board embarked on a project that included a focus on student achievement in literacy and numeracy and closing the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

3. District's Approach to the Pilot Project

During the 2003-2004 school year, a pilot oral language strategy was established in the Sioux Lookout school attendance area. Through a partnership with the Lac Seul First Nation, a special assignment teacher (SAT) was hired to support the implementation of the oral language program at both Hudson Public School and Sioux Mountain Public School. These schools were chosen based on their low EQAO scores and high Aboriginal student population.

A 2004-2005, KPDSB report outlines the reasons why oral language programming is important:

"Language is the invisible information we all carry in our heads that allows us to understand the thoughts of others and express our own thoughts. The child with oral language deficits will have poorly developed language information. This often leads to an inability to adapt to and learn in the classroom where they must listen, read, speak and write. Research indicates that the level of oral language skill is highly predictive of reading development and warrants aggressive intervention to prevent reading failure.

Problems in oral language domains are approximately three to five times greater among poor readers than among good readers. Poor readers have a much higher percentage of receptive (57.4%) and expressive (50.3%) language deficits than good readers (11.8% and 12.2%, respectively).” (Catts, Fey, & Tomblin, 1999)

“Oral language is the spoken means by which children learn to communicate their own needs, thoughts and reflections and to understand the directions and ideas being communicated to them by others. In the educational arena, development of the two main aspects of oral language – the expressive component and the receptive component – allows children to successfully enter their school world and, ultimately, to grow and learn to the best of their abilities.” (Lawton; Ministry of Education, 2003).

The *Ontario Curriculum for Language, Grades 1-8*, stresses the importance of oral communication skills:

Oral communication skills are important because they play a central role in students’ learning in all areas of the curriculum. Students listen and speak in order to understand and explore ideas and concepts, identify and solve problems, organize their experience and knowledge, express and clarify their thoughts, feelings, and opinions, and convey information. Listening and speaking skills are also essential for co-operative learning activities and for social interaction at home, at school, and in the community. (p.39)

KPDSB in partnership with Lac Seul First Nation, equally funded a full time school-based oral language SAT position. This SAT received training in First Steps Oral Language. The training was used as the foundation for supporting classroom teachers in the implementation of oral language in Kindergarten – Grade 3. The role of the SAT was to provide ongoing, at-the-elbow support, by modelling the strategies and facilitating ongoing discussion and feedback regarding oral language development and instructional strategies.

Since the two schools were showing measurable progress for their Aboriginal students, two more sites, Red Lake-Madsen Public School and Lakewood Public School, were added to the pilot in the 2004-2005 school year. In the following school year, 2005-2006, five more schools were added to the pilot project: Ear Falls Public School, King George VI Public School, Keewatin Public School, Wabigoon Public School and New Prospect Public School.

The intent of the oral language initiative is to close the gap between the achievement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students for equity of outcome. To that end, the board has enhanced and expanded the oral language pilot projects throughout the board and are building capacity among teachers through training, support and resources to develop effective oral language instructional strategies. Besides the targeted focus on student achievement, KPDSB has also made a concerted effort to implement effective culturally relevant practices to address Aboriginal student achievement and equity of outcome.

Capacity Building

The district has established a system oral language SAT to focus specifically on oral language programming and training. The system oral language SAT has provided training

and acted as a mentor and coach to staff within the oral language pilot project schools. All primary teachers in the pilot schools, as well as a primary teacher and the early literacy teacher from each elementary school, have received 2 days of oral language training. Four oral language SATs received First Steps Oral Language Tutor training in order to expand the number of tutors who can train and support First Steps Oral Language in the classroom. Oral language training was also offered as a 2 day summer institute, with 23 teachers attending in 2005.

First Steps Oral Language resources were purchased for each Kindergarten – Grade 3 teacher that attended the 2 days of training. Oral language manipulatives were also purchased for use during training, then distributed to participants so that they were able to implement the strategies and activities with students upon their return to the classroom. Additional resources and materials were purchased for each school to support effective oral language teaching strategies, as well as make the connection between oral language, writing and reading. Pilot schools also received guided reading sets of the Eaglecrest Guided Reading series of levelled books for use with primary students. These book sets promote and reflect Aboriginal culture and consist of 6 copies of each of the 26 titles.

Development of a one-hour workshop was completed in September 2005. The intent of the workshop was to be used in schools to communicate the purpose of, and expectation of the strategy. The target audience was staff and parents of the pilot project schools. The workshop outlines the background and purpose of the pilot projects, an overview of the project, the role of the SAT, the data collection, and the plan for an oral language focus across the curriculum.

KPDSB also developed and delivered a 20 minute outreach workshop for parents and community. This was used with the System Parent Council to inform parents and community members of the pilot projects.

A Professional Learning Community (PLC) was established in September 2005 to research and investigate teaching strategies that enhance language learning for all students in the board. The oral language SATs from the 9 pilot schools, along with the system oral language SAT meet monthly as a PLC to investigate current research and to collaborate on ways to support classroom teachers for implementation of oral language strategies. SATs share ideas, strategies, newsletters and best practices via email and incorporate this information into their work with teachers.

In June 2005, a data literacy expert began work with board staff. KPDSB staff are reviewing, analyzing and interpreting oral language assessment data, and will determine a reporting format as well as provide training regarding the use of data to inform teaching practice. Additional data literacy experts as well as language development experts were accessed through the University of Western Ontario to assist and advise with the data review and analysis.

Program Evaluation

A focus group consisting of oral language SATs, a supervisory officer, principals and one primary teacher from each of the first 4 pilot schools was formed to determine strengths

and weaknesses of the program, best practices regarding delivery of program – teaching strategies, delivery to students, communication with staff/parents – and next steps within the district.

The following recommendations were formulated by the Oral Language Focus Group to further develop the implementation of the oral language program:

- develop a staff meeting presentation to be used in September in schools offering oral language programming, in order to redefine the goals of the program and the expectations for staff in implementing the program to ensure consistency in programming
- develop an introductory workshop for SATs that they can provide to staff to reinforce expected teaching strategies for oral language programming
- provide monthly meetings throughout the year or oral language SATs to meet with the system oral language SAT to review and reflect on programming and to share best practices
- create a database for assessment data, connected with the board system in order to make future analysis of data and its implications more efficient
- further analysis of oral language data compared to early literacy assessment data to look for correlations that could influence teaching practice and student success
- investigate way to expand oral language training to include junior, intermediate and secondary
- oral language SATs will continue to support classroom teachers, and model effective strategies to enhance oral language in all areas of the curriculum
- investigate community outreach and public relations to emphasize the importance of oral language development and the role it plays in literacy development and school success

In terms of the board’s overall approach to literacy, it was striking to hear several teachers who had worked in the board previously and then had left the board for a few years. The teachers who had left and returned to the board reported that they noticed a “big difference”, for the better, in the board’s approach.

4. Research Questions

The Oral Language Project began in Fall of 2005. The purpose of the project was to examine schools that were demonstrating improvements in literacy. The research questions focused on three areas of inquiry:

1. Impact and capacity of the district’s strategies and actions on school and classroom improvement. The following questions, taken from the “Effective District-Wide Strategies Project”, helped guide the inquiry:
 - a. Has a shared focus on literacy been fostered across all schools in the district?
 - b. At the school level, what initiatives and actions have taken place to improve student achievement in literacy?
 - c. How does the district challenge and support all schools to improve?

- d. How can improvements become sustainable?
2. Raising the bar and closing the gap, supporting equity of outcome through culturally relevant practices. The following questions helped guide the inquiry:
 - a. Is there evidence of students' culture/language/community reflected in the classroom? School?
 - b. Are students' personal voices heard?
 - c. Is the space created for students to be able to speak and does the teacher reinforce it?
 - d. What practices are the teachers engaging in to enable Aboriginal students?
 - e. Does any of the material/topics/context of the lesson reflect elements of the students' home or community?
 - f. Are there any Aboriginal teachers in the system?
 - g. Did the teachers' training or professional development enable them to teach in the community?
 3. The oral language strategy. The following questions helped guide the inquiry:
 - a. How has the fact that the focus of the project is on Aboriginal students affected your choice of strategies?
 - b. What experiences are you providing for children to help them make the link between oral and written language?
 - c. What kinds of oral language does this strategy/program focus on?
 - d. What are some of the specific strategies used for oral language development? Why should teachers use those strategies?
 - e. Do you use assessment data to inform more precise instructional practice?

5. Research Method

School visits were conducted in six of the nine pilot schools in the district. Interviews were held with members of the Senior Leadership Team, school principals and individual teachers as well as teacher focus groups in four of the schools visited. Data collection also included a review of various oral literacy resources.

Student data collection included the following assessments which are administered by the oral language SAT – these are norm-referenced (standardized) tests for the purposes of board data collection:

- Woodcock Johnson ©III (the following 2 subtests)
 - Test 1 Letter-Word Identification
 - Test 14 – Picture Vocabulary
- Preschool Language Scale Fourth Edition (the following 2 subtests)
 - Auditory Comprehension (which tests receptive language)
 - Expressive Communication

The board provided data for students in senior and junior kindergarten for the 2003–2004 and 2004–2005 school years.

The oral language strategy is showing remarkable improvements in oral language skills in all students but especially dramatic are the improvements seen in Aboriginal students.

6. Student Achievement Data

During the 2003-2004 school year, baseline data was collected for the Oral Language Pilot Project, using the Letter Word Identification and the Picture Vocabulary of the Woodcock Johnson. These assessment pieces were administered in September and again in June, to JK and SK students at the two pilot schools. Because of the need to analyze the expressive language of students, the expressive portion of the Preschool Language Scale was administered in December and again in June. This was a very short turnaround time-frame for the assessment, but data was gathered as baseline information, and became more useful for future analysis. Assessments continued to be administered in September and again in June in each school year. Over time the data will be analyzed along with early literacy data to look for indications of growth.

The results for the school year 2003-2004 were analyzed looking at the growth over 9 months for the Woodcock Johnson and 5 months for the Preschool Language Scale. In the initial analysis we saw the following results:

Woodcock Johnson- Letter Word Identification

At the JK level one pilot school showed an average growth of 17 months over the 9 month period, with a range of -6 to 40 months growth. The other pilot school showed an average growth of 12 months over the 9 month period with a range of 0 to 23 months growth.

SK at one school showed an average 9 months of growth over 9 months and the other school showed an average growth of 16 months growth over 9 months.

When analyzing the Woodcock Johnson Letter Word Identification scores, it was noted that students who scored 1 to 1.5 years below their chronological age in September, made the greatest gains. In some cases their achievement matched or surpassed their chronological age by June. Analysis of data on students who appeared to regress showed that it was often a matter of the answer to only one question that provided this result. This was not deemed statistically significant.

Woodcock Johnson-Picture Vocabulary

At the JK level one pilot school showed an average growth of 7 months over 9 months. The growth ranged from a -14 months to a gain of 32 months. The other pilot school showed an average growth of 12 months over 9 months, with a range of 3 to 20 months gain.

SK at one school showed an average of 10 months of growth over 9 months, with a growth range of -7 to 34 months gain. The other school showed 16 months growth over 9 months, and had a range of 0 to 33 months gain.

Data collected from the Woodcock Johnson Picture Vocabulary test for JK students in September 2003 showed that 72% of Aboriginal students were performing below age

level upon school entry. The average gap for those who scored below age level was 11.1 months.

After implementation of the oral literacy strategy, scores collected from the Woodcock Johnson Picture Vocabulary test for the same students in June 2004, show that 82% of the students demonstrated growth in performance.

Preschool Language Scale - Expressive Communication

At the JK Level one pilot school showed an average growth of 9 months over 5 months, with a range of -3 to 16 months growth. The other pilot school showed an average growth of 7 months over 5 months, with a range of 2 to 15 months growth.

At the SK level at one pilot school, the average growth was 8 months over 5 months. The range of growth was 0 to 24 months growth. The other pilot school had an average of 11 months growth over 5 months. Their range of growth for SK was 2 to 19 months.

Preliminary analysis indicates a range of growth in both JK and SK at both schools. It was noted that students who were 1 to 1.5 years below their expected achievement made the most significant gains. Indications are that students performing at Level 1 or 2 may benefit significantly from instruction that focuses on oral language teaching strategies, and that these strategies provide opportunities for these students to make the greatest gains. It was also noted that students who were performing at their expected level, also made significant gains. Although the results appear promising, it must be noted that this is baseline data, therefore further data collection and analysis is necessary to reach valid, reliable conclusions. The district will continue to track the students to determine their success in achieving benchmarks in reading and writing.

2004-2005 - The project showed promising results and was therefore expanded in September 2004 to one school in Kenora and one school in Red Lake. A 0.5 oral language special assignment teacher was assigned to each school. The oral language special assignment teachers and kindergarten teachers in each school received training from the system oral language SAT.

Pre and post assessments were completed in the first 4 pilot schools. The purpose for gathering this assessment data was to determine growth in oral language skills from September to June of students in JK and SK. Assessments included the Woodcock Johnson Letter Word Identification subtest and the Woodcock Johnson Picture Vocabulary subtest, as well as the Preschool Language Scale (PLS) Expressive Communication test that was administered in 2003-2004. The PLS Auditory Comprehension test, which assesses receptive language, was added to the battery of assessments to give a more complete picture of the students' abilities and areas of need.

Growth was determined and compared to chronological age and expected achievement. Trends have continued to show encouraging results for the majority of students. Students who demonstrated a gap of 1.0 – 1.5 years below expected achievement in September, demonstrated the most significant growth in June. Many of the students 1.0 – 1.5 years below expected achievement in JK continued to show steady growth in SK, and often were performing at or close to their expected achievement level by the end of SK.

KPDSB early literacy assessment data collected in pilot schools indicated growth in reading achievement. Analysis shows some of the greatest gains at the first two pilot schools: Hudson Public School and Sioux Mountain Public School. This evidence supports the program effectiveness in that these are the original pilot schools and have, therefore, had more time to incorporate the teaching strategies and support oral language development across the curriculum. Another factor supporting these gains is that the original oral language SAT has worked closely with the system oral language SAT, since inception of the pilot study, incorporating and creating strategies for two years.

Evidence of Oral Language Development

The following indicators of effectiveness were seen in school visits and classroom observations:

- Same message heard in all schools
- In classrooms visited:
 - Students were talking, explaining, questioning, with partners and in small groups
 - Students were orally brainstorming, organizing, revising, summarizing (News-telling activity)
 - Students were building grade and subject specific vocabulary through discussion
 - Students were sharing ideas, information, opinions with a partner, in small groups and in the larger classroom
 - Teachers were using language that indicated oral strategies are being taught and used in various subject areas
 - Teachers were encouraging the exchange of ideas, respecting everyone's viewpoint and using effective listening and speaking skills
 - Teachers were encouraging active listening and dialogue

In classrooms visited, there was also evidence of:

- Oral language manipulatives (e.g. barrier games, storytelling gloves/aprons, spider web)
- Oral language being integrated into curriculum
- Visual prompts to aid oral expression
- Teachers monitoring, modelling and guiding purposeful classroom 'talk'
- Students interacting with partners and in small groups
- Newsletter sent out to parents informing them of the KPDSB oral language strategy

7. Culturally Relevant Practices

Culturally inclusive curriculum is difficult to develop due to the cultural diversity within the First Nations communities. As an example, one of the common grounds, in Aboriginal culture, is the Seven Grandfather Teachings. However, the delivery and the emphasis of the teachings may vary within individual Aboriginal communities. The

following are examples of some of the culturally relevant initiatives of the Keewatin-Patricia DSB:

- The hiring of an Aboriginal Advisor to the District
 - It is important to note that this individual is seen as one Aboriginal person who can provide the district with one perspective, it is then up to the board to take the advice or not. If, for example, another Education Director in another Treaty area or in another community does not like that advice, it does not fall against the Advisor as advice, it falls against the board who either took the advice or not. This is about respecting the fact that one person cannot speak for all other Aboriginal people.
- Partnership with the Bimosé Tribal Council for instructional support in schools
- Specialist teachers of Ojibwe and Oji-Cree languages
- Eaglecrest Guided Reading book sets, purchased for each of 18 elementary schools - 6 copies of 42 levelled readers
 - stories and pictures depict Aboriginal families in everyday circumstances in today's world
- Additional resource purchases for each elementary school in the District include:
 - Circle Program Picture Books which includes multiple copies of 8 different titles that can be used in K – Grade 2 classrooms. Book sets that reflect Aboriginal culture to support literacy across the curriculum were purchased for each school.
- Teaching strategies that are culturally relevant include:
 - allowing wait time for question response that values listening and consolidation of thinking reflective of Aboriginal customs
 - in some instances, eye contact between listener and speaker may not fit Aboriginal custom; teachers' focus should shift to acknowledgement of attention to speaker or listener without direct eye contact
- Principals who are hired by the board to work in schools with high Aboriginal student populations have extensive experience in working with Aboriginal people
- Recognition that there is a need to build trust and to build a relationship with a community of parents and grandparents who attended residential schools, for example:
 - promoting the cultural practices within the schools, such as the spring and fall feasts, which provide confidence and security for parents in knowing that they have enrolled their children in schools that work in partnership with and value the customs of the Aboriginal communities
- Innovative approach to promoting Aboriginal/Parent Partnership, in one school visited, by forming an Aboriginal Parent Council

Larry Beardy, teacher of Oji-Cree at KPDSB provided a sense of the district's strategy around oral literacy, closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and culturally relevant practices geared at Aboriginal students.

Larry described the 'talking circle' and suggested that the 'talking circle' "teaches students how to listen, how to control themselves in order to really listen, the essence of this being that the spirit of communication is actually feeling the words and truly feeling what someone has to say when you're listening."

“Students need to learn how to learn. This has been part of our culture, our traditions, since time began for us, the teachings of our elders, the teachings through oral communication, and the talking, listening, and feeling. That’s how you communicate properly.” The talking circle is one avenue among many others, and at the heart of it, is the seven core values - the teachings of the seven grandfathers. The seven core values being: love, humility, wisdom, bravery, honesty, truth, and respect. All of these are tied in together – one cannot function without the other one.

Communication then, is not necessarily just how you speak or talk to other people, but how you listen is the key to a most effective way of communicating. “We were taught, since time began, that in order to survive you had to learn to listen. If we listen, watch what’s around our environment, listen to the animals, the rivers, the lakes, then we get to know and learn everything we need to learn about our environment, the animals, in order to get the basic necessities like shelter, clothing and food in order to survive.”

Another important part of this is about moving from the individual to the group; working together as a team, as a group, as a community, and to really respect each other in that way and to come together with each persons strengths to form a strong core of a community. That, in itself, he explained is what a circle should be, and what communities need, and what each individual needs to know to make a really strong contribution to the rest of the community, and society. Furthermore, it is very important that every student, every person on the team, in the group, in the school, has a chance to listen, to be heard, and to speak.

Communication becomes almost transcendental when you go beyond the technical part and the grammatical structure of the language. It is a contemplative, or as Larry refers to it, a spiritual way of being. “We call it spirituality, and when we say “spirituality”, it doesn’t have anything to do with religion or church, it’s how you live from within to connect with everything around you in a spiritual sense.”

“Storytelling, to us, is a way of passing on our teachings, our culture, the significance of our environment and how we relate with everything, and the circle of life. All of that, to us, is real. There are people who connect that with their real life, that makes sense, that has meaning, that is real, because in everything we are exposed to that we learn about, it’s not the person telling the story or teaching that will change their life, it’s you that can do that. Everything that happens in your life, everything that you do in your life, is your choice. Destiny happens, and when destiny happens you have a choice.”

“This oral language strategy hits the nail right on the head for Aboriginal students.”
(Larry Beardy).

8. Oral Language Strategy

“The oral language approach promotes communication skills and understanding. For Aboriginal students, this is important because it provides opportunities for them to express who they are and provides them a more inclusive and safe environment in which to learn. It gives them permission to be themselves, freeing up energy to open their

minds, increase their capacity for learning, and promotes creativity. The oral language strategy gives them the opportunity to express their gifts, enhance them, and to share them with others.

In the Ojibwe culture, the belief is that children come into the world with special gifts. It is the duty and responsibility of the adults, parents, grandparents and teachers to create the opportunities to bring out and enhance these gifts in children. The oral language strategy works because it reflects the core values of the Aboriginal culture in its approach to teaching and learning. It's a validation process and most importantly, it's about acceptance." (LaVerna Greene).

The oral language strategy used by KPDSB is based on the First Steps Oral Language Program which looks at oral language from 2 aspects: first from a continuum that helps teachers assess where a child is developmentally; secondly, the resource book that outlines a number of activities and strategies for teachers to use to help students move along the continuum.

The initial attraction to the First Steps Oral Language training that came out of Australia was that the First Steps strategies were used successfully in schools where the majority of students were Maori. The system oral language SAT recognized that if the program had been successful with Maori students, it could also work with other indigenous people.

Other resources used to inform the oral language strategy are the Ontario Ministry of Education's *A Guide to Effective Instruction in Reading, K-3* and *A Guide to Effective Literacy Instruction, Grades 4 to 6, the Ontario Language Curriculum 2006*. (See references for a list of current research on oral language development.)

Capacity building started with the system oral language SAT who:

- ✓ received the 9 day First Steps training, she, in turn, trained the JK/SK teacher and an oral language SAT, as well as all of the primary teachers and special education resource teacher (SERT) at the two pilot project schools. The training involved 5 days of initial training, 1 month of practice followed by training at the school 1 day a month with a second day for classroom visits to observe the implementation of the oral language strategies. Training included both instructional and assessment strategies.
- ✓ visited schools once a month in the first year of the pilot and the oral language SAT was at the schools daily for support. This resulted in the monitoring of the implementation of the program and monitoring the impact with pre and post tests of JK and SK students in both schools for baseline data.
- ✓ trained every early literacy SAT in the board in Spring 2004. This meant training 1 teacher in each of the 18 elementary schools in the board. These teachers were expected to start sharing the strategies with the classroom teachers and look for areas where teachers did not have strategies for oral literacy.

- ✓ offered a two-day summer institute for oral language in August 2004. This institute was mainly targeted at primary classroom teachers, although a few junior teachers also attended.
- ✓ All elementary and secondary principals received an introductory training session. The district's philosophy is that principals need a certain level of expertise in order to support initiatives.
- ✓ offered a "Literacy Plus One" two day oral language training session for early literacy SATs plus one other primary teacher from their school. Although this might have been a repeat session for some, the objective was to start creating teams within the schools. Two days were spent in Kenora, and 2 days in Dryden so that everyone in the area was covered. Thirty teachers attended each session for a total of 60. The board paid for these sessions, however principals were invited to attend as well as send any additional teachers at their own cost. Some schools sent every primary school teacher, while others only sent some.
- ✓ offered another two-day summer institute in 2005. Attendees included primary, junior, intermediate and secondary teachers.
- ✓ offered a 1 day follow-up session in Fall of 2005 for all those who attended the Spring 2005 session. The day included additional oral language training and an opportunity to share successes of program implementation in their own classrooms and to discuss next steps. Another 1 day follow-up session was held in May 2006, at board expense, to keep the momentum going. This session offered more opportunity to discuss classroom successes, new resources, cross-curricular application, as well as oral language links to writing and reading.
- ✓ offered another "Literacy Plus One" two-day session in January 2006, for later literacy teachers plus one junior classroom teacher. For both "Literacy Plus One" sessions, principals were encouraged to choose someone who really wanted to attend, who was really excited about the program and would go away and try the things they had heard during the training.

As a result of these capacity-building efforts, the district has helped build an oral language team that includes the principal, in every school. In order to build a climate of the importance of literacy, there is also a literacy committee in every school which includes: early and later literacy teachers (a representative from each division), a SERT, an administrator, a classroom assistant and one other board employee.

Further, in January 2006, a team of approximately 10 people from the district organized a two-day session entitled: "Closing the Gap". Participants included: principals, later literacy teachers, early literacy teachers, and SERTS from each elementary school for a total of approximately 55 – 60 attendees. The purpose of the session was to train more people, share strategies to help students move from level 2 to level 3, focus on oral language, first steps writing, differentiated instruction, professional learning communities, and planning strategies.

At the district level, the program is being monitored by the system oral language SAT and the superintendent of education.

Lateral Capacity Building

The system oral language SAT provided training in the North West Region of Ontario for all of the NOEL (Northern Ontario Educational Leaders) member boards: Keewatin-Patricia DSB, Kenora Catholic DSB, Lakehead DSB, Thunder Bay Catholic DSB, Northwest Catholic DSB, Rainy River DSB, Superior Greenstone DSB, Superior North DSB, Northern School Resource Alliance.

Three, one-day sessions were offered in order to introduce effective teaching strategies in oral language and implications for closing the gap and equity of outcome for Aboriginal students. Approximately 130 teachers were trained over the course of 3 days. Principals were also in attendance.

In Fall of 2005, the system oral language SAT delivered two, half-day workshops at the NOEL Leadership Conference in Thunder Bay. In attendance were directors, superintendents and principals. These workshops emphasized the importance of oral language instruction and provided concrete examples of what this would look like and sound like in the classroom.

The same workshop will be offered at the NOEL Summer Institute in August 2006.

Assessment

KPDSB believes in using assessment, with ongoing monitoring to inform planning. According to KPDSB, effective teachers use systematic observation and recording as a means of assessment and evaluation. The assessment of oral language looks at speaking and listening in the classroom as a means of learning, this means that assessment data is gathered through:

- observation
- the use of anecdotal records
- the use of checklists of indicators
- talking with students (conferencing or discussion)
- observing students talking with and listening to peers

Teachers' daybooks illustrated how the use of data informed their practice. Teachers also said that they do collaborative marking for consistency.

In the schools visited, teachers determine where a student is developmentally in order to inform planning for instruction. Teachers use a range of different strategies and activities for different purposes according to the needs of the student. It is important that teachers are consciously aware of which strategies to select, why, and how these strategies impact a student's understanding of what counts in literacy.

Teachers take into account and recognize the specific skills, knowledge and attitudes that students bring to the classroom. They also see it as important to recognize value and extend students' diversity in order to build confidence in each student's own abilities.

Teachers recognize that some students may need scaffolding to support learning, and that this support may vary in degree and duration.

The school-based oral language SATs administer the standardized assessments in September and in June to track the growth of students for research purposes.

Instructional Practice

“Oral language has been problematic because it is intangible and therefore it is important to define it clearly with teachers.” Maury Swenson

The district has focused on three areas of oral language: the language of social interaction, the language of literacy (book language is different than classroom language), and the language of learning/thinking. These are the types of oral language which are developed using First Steps Oral Language teaching strategies and activities.

Each type of oral language is interrelated and complements the other, and is developed to provide opportunities for children to use language for a range of audiences and purposes. The program recognizes that speaking, listening, reading and writing have a role in communication and that development in one area is linked to development in the others. Classroom teachers develop and encourage oral language skills across the entire curriculum.

“Understanding the English Language Learner”

“Canadian-born English language learners”

“Many English language learners were born in Canada, and raised in families or communities in which languages other than English are spoken, or in which the variety of English spoken differs significantly from the English of Ontario classrooms.

- Many children in Aboriginal communities speak a first language other than English, such as Cree or Ojibwe. Others speak a variety of English significantly different from that of the school environment.” Pg. 48. *Many roots, many voices: Supporting English language learners in every classroom. A practical guide for Ontario educators.* Ministry of Education of Ontario. Queen’s Printer for Ontario, 2005.

"In our classrooms, we may see these second and third generation children falling into a disturbing category: many of them are essentially *alingual*, that is, they do not have mastery of either English or their family's native language.

English language learners come to our classrooms from a variety of cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. We may have one child in one of these categories or we may have only one child who is *not* an English language learner. While the number of ELL children in a classroom or school building may ultimately affect larger program and policy decisions, incorporating best practices for ELL children, even if we only have one in a classroom, will mean better instruction for all students." Houk Farin A. *Supporting English Language Learners, A Guide For Teachers and Administrators.* Heinemann. 2002. p. 4

The following oral language activities focus on teaching strategies for whole class, small group and partners. Many of the strategies serve as a rehearsal for writing and reading. Also important to note is that assessment is built into these activities. While the student is speaking or listening, the teacher may use a checklist, rubric and/or a continuum to highlight student skills.

Spider Web

For this activity, the teacher holds a ball of yarn and invites a child to begin to respond to whatever the topic of discussion is for the day, just before the child begins to speak the teacher rolls the ball of yarn to the child. The ball of yarn is rolled from speaker to speaker until a “web” is formed with the yarn.

The spider web is an engaging activity that provides children with the opportunity to express their opinions, to share their thoughts, and to listen to peers. It reinforces the value of speaking, listening and turn taking. For less confident speakers, the spider web provides necessary practice in hearing and using language. Students build confidence in their use of oral language. The teacher is there to model correct sentence structures, descriptive vocabulary, appropriate volume, and to provide feedback. The children feel safe to take risks and make mistakes in a supportive environment. As children see their ideas being valued they want to express them more often. This desire to share links oral language to writing as children are motivated to record their own ideas into print. The spider web is suitable as a small group and/or a whole class activity.

Circle Stories

In this strategy, students create stories spontaneously which is very effective in developing critical listening and creative thinking. It also promotes recall and prediction skills since students must carefully monitor the developing story before adding a logical extension to the previous speaker’s contribution. The teacher’s role during the circle story session is to support and monitor the production of the story. Practice with familiar stories will help students become more comfortable making up their own.

Buddy Reading

Pairing younger readers with older children can enhance the reading process for both children. It is also an excellent way to review reading strategies for the older child. Buddies are given cards or bookmarks that review these strategies so they have reminders handy when they read with their younger buddies. Older buddies are encouraged to use the same terminology that they hear in their classroom instruction.

Barrier Games

This strategy involves using and interpreting oral description. In pairs, students practice their speaking and listening skills when giving and following directions with a barrier between them. This barrier is used to prevent students from seeing the partner’s image or task. Vocabulary of description is also developed- students begin to use a variety of nouns, attributes, location words. Barrier games may involve simple sequence or pattern making, matching pairs, assembly, construction, location, grids, route finding, spotting differences. Barrier games may be played by pairs, or in groups.

Activity Based Sharing

Activity Based Sharing encourages students to verbally share and explain their work with others. This builds meaningful speaking and listening experiences across the curriculum. The language of planning, problem solving, step-by-step procedures, sequencing and description are all supported through activity-based sharing.

Turn and Talk

Turn and Talk is a strategy designed to enable students to access background knowledge and formulate ideas on a given topic. Using Turn and Talk enhances student confidence, as well as building community among the students in the classroom. For Turn and Talk, the teacher acts as a facilitator, not really leading the discussion. Students are instructed to discuss an issue, idea or make a prediction with a partner. Partners listen to each other and stay focused on the topic, having a discussion (sharing ideas) with a partner in 1 minute or less. The teacher carefully instructs students to turn back to the group and stop discussion with a given signal. Once trained, the teacher just says, "Turn and Talk to your partner about ..." and a purposeful discussion should take place. The teacher ensures that the students adhere to the short time frame and focus the group back after the quick talk. This strategy may be used during reading to help students read critically and in turn share their thoughts regarding the text. Turn and Talk is an effective strategy to use across the curriculum.

Story Reconstruction

Story Reconstruction uses an oral language approach to develop inferential story sequence and comprehension skills. The activity requires students to use language relating to story structure and the links between characters, setting and plot. The Story Reconstruction activity is used in a whole class (shared) format to reconstruct familiar stories and later unfamiliar stories. Pairs or small groups of students are given sets of pictures from a story with the text removed. Pictures are divided among the students in the group and each student analyzes their picture to decide on possible events and order. Groups then attempt to reconstruct the story, with each student sharing where they think their picture belongs, what is happening in the story, what they can infer from the picture, and why they think it goes next in the sequence. On completion of the story reconstruction, one student from each group shares their version of the story with the class, promoting discussion and comparing. The 'real' story may then be read by the teacher or as a shared reading activity. Students will need numerous opportunities to reconstruct stories in the group, before moving to an independent reconstruction. This activity links to pre-telling and retelling activities prior to written retellings.

Discussion Strategy - Group Roles

Discussion is introduced through the establishment and clarification of what is expected of the group and its members. In an effective group organization, individuals are dependent on each other to achieve a common goal. In the classroom, students need the opportunity to practice and refine a range of roles to develop social and communication skills through discussion.

Following are steps for organizing discussion sessions and the use of group roles:

- 1) Discuss the roles the students will be assigned in their groups.

Manager-watches the time; summarizes where the group is up to; makes sure everyone understands what the task is.

Encourager-makes sure everyone is having a turn; asks people to give their opinion; praises others' ideas; encourages people to keep going.

Recorder-writes down people's ideas; asks questions to check what people mean

Reporter-reports the group's ideas back to the class

At this point, the teacher stresses that all group members are responsible for helping with the actual task.

- 2) Organize the students into groups of 4. Allocate roles
- 3) Ask one student representing each role to re-explain his/her task to the class.
- 4) Introduce the activity to the class.
- 5) Observe children's interaction during the small-group activity. Assist with difficulties which arise.
- 6) Have the reporter from each group share their group's work with the class.
- 7) Share with the group examples of effective interaction that you observed with the group.
- 8) Encourage students to reflect by asking, "What was something you did that helped your group?" "Did you notice things other people did in your group that helped?" "What did you learn from doing this with other people?"

9. Outreach

The oral language SATs have prepared introductory sessions on the importance of oral language practices that can be shared with daycares in the community. The district's outreach program has included going out to meet with daycare workers from surrounding Aboriginal communities, Lac Seul, Frenchman's Head, as well as Sioux Lookout and Kenora. This program has benefited not only Aboriginal students but also students from low income cut-off (LICO) families.

10. Challenges

- large geographic areas and diverse Aboriginal communities
- in finding qualified Aboriginal teachers, many First Nations' people can work for Aboriginal organizations or prefer to work on their Reserve. Their skills are highly in demand.
- In the KPDSB area, 37% of the population does not have a high school diploma. This limits the pool of individuals qualified to become teachers.
- 533 of the 6,000 students in the district have been formally identified through IPRC (Individual Placement Review Committee)

11. Future Directions

The district-wide approach to implementing an oral language strategy is having impact on schools beyond the pilot schools. Teachers are reporting that they feel empowered by having this training.

KPDSB is assessing the impact of the strategy on an ongoing basis and recognizes that precision teaching is a work in progress.

KPDSB intends to monitor the impact and results of this initiative over time.

“Initial results have been encouraging, but we recognize that the project will require ongoing analysis over a longer period of time. Observations in schools where we began the pilot projects have been positive. Feedback from teachers who have received the training has been enthusiastic, and as a result, many teachers and principals have asked for the chance to include additional workshop participants at the school’s cost.” Wendy Wiedenhoeft, Superintendent of Education.

12. Lessons Learned

The following key lessons learned from this case study report include suggestions for learning at all three levels of implementation: board, school and

District-wide Strategy

- a very clear vision and focus placed on higher student achievement levels and an attitude of equity of outcome for all
 - this vision is communicated to all board staff and reflected in the connections between board, schools and classrooms
- a clear, coherent strategy and implementation plan
- a monitoring, review, feedback and accountability plan to see that the vision and focus is carried out in schools and classrooms
- resources are prioritized to support vision and focus
- district, board and school staff with literacy expertise are in place at all levels
 - system’s oral language SAT keeps a precision-based focus
 - school-based SATs help form PLCs in order to maintain and enhance district-wide consistency across an expansive geographic area

“Time to build a relationship with the classroom teachers and from there, together, you can start implementing strategies successfully. With each teacher, things happen differently to jive with their style of teaching. The oral language SAT has to be flexible and find a way to make the teachers feel like they are there to help the teacher and not to tell them one more thing they need to do. Teachers became more excited and used the oral language strategies more when they felt they were part of a team.” (Candice Holmstrom, *School-based Oral Language SAT*).

Culturally Relevant Practices

- board’s commitment and attention to social, emotional, character and personal development
- Aboriginal value-based culture fostered at board and school levels promoting collective moral purpose (e.g. teachings of the seven grandfathers) through curriculum and instructional practices

Oral Language Strategy

- board's commitment to building capacity and developing precision in knowledge skills and daily practices for improving learning
- oral language programming is "good for all, but necessary for some students in our schools" (Maury Swenson, System Oral Language SAT)
- the oral language programming has supported and complimented early literacy teaching strategies already taking place as part of the KPDSB early literacy program and recommended in the *Ontario Early Reading Strategy*
- the oral language training and programming assisted teachers in seeing the connection between the development of oral language, and reading and writing skills
- teachers were able to see and determine how oral language programming contributed to overall improvement in literacy skills