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## Literacy Enhancement for Indigenous Children in Wikwemikong A Culturally Responsive Approach to Reading Development

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines literacy enhancement strategies for Indigenous children in Wikwemikong, a First Nations community in Ontario, Canada. The research explores culturally responsive literacy instruction approaches designed to address the persistent achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Through systematic analysis of intervention programs combining phonological awareness training, culturally relevant pedagogy, and community engagement, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of integrated literacy enhancement models. Results indicate significant improvements in phonemic awareness, reading comprehension, and student motivation when instruction

honors Indigenous epistemologies and incorporates traditional knowledge systems. The findings emphasize the critical importance of shifting from deficit-based models to abundance-based frameworks that recognize Indigenous children's cultural assets. This research contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting culturally responsive literacy practices and provides practical implications for educators working with Indigenous learners.

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## INTRODUCTION

Literacy development among Indigenous children in Canada continues to represent one of the most pressing educational challenges facing the nation. Indigenous students consistently demonstrate lower literacy achievement compared to their non-Indigenous peers, with disparities becoming evident as early as Grade 3 and persisting throughout their educational trajectories (Guiberson & Vining, 2023). These gaps reflect not merely educational deficits but rather systemic failures to recognize and build upon the cultural and linguistic strengths that Indigenous children bring to learning environments. In Wikwemikong, an Anishinaabe First Nations community on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, educators and community leaders have recognized the urgent need for culturally responsive literacy interventions that honor traditional knowledge while supporting children's development of English literacy skills.

The literacy challenges faced by Indigenous children stem from complex historical, cultural, and systemic factors. According to Castagno and Brayboy (2008), educational systems have historically marginalized Indigenous epistemologies and cultural narratives, creating learning environments where Indigenous students' identities and experiences are undervalued or ignored entirely. This cultural disconnection contributes to disengagement, reduced motivation, and ultimately lower literacy outcomes. Furthermore, research indicates that approximately 100,000 children in Canada fail to complete Grade 3 reading at grade level annually, with Indigenous children disproportionately represented in this population (Grover, cited in Enbridge, 2022). The consequences of early literacy failure extend far beyond academic achievement, as children who do not read proficiently by Grade 3 are four times less likely to graduate from high school (Innovations for Learning Canada, 2022).

Contemporary research emphasizes the critical importance of culturally responsive literacy instruction for Indigenous learners. Gillispie (2021) argues that effective literacy intervention must acknowledge and integrate Indigenous cultural frames of reference, utilizing teaching methodologies that resonate with Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. This approach represents a fundamental shift from traditional deficit models, which focus exclusively on perceived weaknesses, toward abundance models that emphasize student strengths, cultural assets, and community resources (Guiberson & Vining, 2023). Culturally responsive pedagogy recognizes

that literacy is not a culturally neutral skill but rather a practice embedded in lived experiences and cultural contexts (Martinez, 2021). For Indigenous children, this means that literacy instruction must bridge Western educational expectations with Indigenous knowledge systems and storytelling traditions.

Phonological awareness and phonemic awareness represent foundational competencies for literacy development across all populations. Research demonstrates that explicit instruction in phonological awareness significantly improves reading and spelling outcomes, particularly when combined with systematic phonics instruction (Rice et al., 2024). For Indigenous children, however, phonological awareness instruction must be carefully adapted to account for potential linguistic differences between Indigenous languages and English. Studies examining Australian Aboriginal children found significant differences in phonological awareness and early spelling skills compared to non-Aboriginal peers, particularly in phoneme segmentation and non-word reading tasks (McInnes et al., 2010). These findings suggest that culturally and linguistically relevant assessment and instruction approaches are essential for supporting Indigenous children's literacy development.

The integration of Indigenous languages and cultural content into literacy instruction represents another critical component of effective practice. Allison-Burbank et al. (2023) emphasize that Indigenous language revitalization and English literacy development should not be viewed as competing goals but rather as complementary processes that can mutually reinforce one another. When Indigenous children have opportunities to develop literacy skills in both their heritage language and English, they demonstrate stronger metalinguistic awareness and deeper engagement with reading and writing tasks. Moreover, the inclusion of culturally relevant texts and learning materials validates children's identities and experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and motivation that is essential for sustained literacy development (Tortola, 2024).

Community engagement and family involvement constitute essential elements of successful literacy interventions for Indigenous children. Research consistently demonstrates that literacy programs are most effective when they actively involve families, Elders, and community knowledge keepers in the instructional process (Steele et al., 2024). This collaborative approach ensures that literacy instruction aligns with community values and priorities while creating meaningful connections between school-based learning and children's home experiences. In Indigenous communities, where oral traditions and intergenerational knowledge transmission hold particular cultural significance, engaging families and Elders in literacy activities creates powerful opportunities for children to see connections between traditional storytelling practices and contemporary literacy skills.

The present study examines literacy enhancement strategies implemented in Wikwemikong, focusing specifically on approaches that integrate culturally responsive pedagogy with evidence-based literacy instruction. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of culturally sustaining pedagogy (McCarty & Lee, 2017) and

the science of reading (Brady, 2020), this research explores how Indigenous children's literacy development can be supported through interventions that honor cultural identity while building foundational reading skills. The study addresses the following research question: How can literacy enhancement programs for Indigenous children in Wikwemikong effectively integrate culturally responsive teaching practices with systematic phonological awareness and comprehension instruction to improve reading outcomes and student engagement?

## METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative assessment of literacy outcomes with qualitative analysis of teacher and student experiences. The research was conducted in collaboration with the Wikwemikong Board of Education and local Elders, following principles of Indigenous research methodology that prioritize community partnership, cultural protocols, and reciprocal benefit (Steele et al., 2024). All research activities received approval from the community leadership and adhered to the Tri-Council Policy Statement guidelines for research involving First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

The study sample included 48 Indigenous children in Grades 1-3 (ages 6-9) attending the elementary school in Wikwemikong. Children were selected for participation based on screening assessments indicating below-grade-level performance in phonological awareness and reading comprehension. The intervention program operated for 12 weeks, with participants receiving daily 30-minute literacy instruction sessions in small groups of 4-6 children. Instruction was delivered by trained literacy interventionists recruited from the community and supported by certified teachers. The intervention curriculum integrated explicit phonological awareness instruction following evidence-based sequences (Rice et al., 2024) with culturally responsive elements including Indigenous storytelling, traditional knowledge integration, and use of culturally relevant texts. Quantitative data collection included pre- and post-intervention assessments of phonological awareness using standardized measures adapted for cultural appropriateness, as well as curriculum-based reading fluency and comprehension measures. Qualitative data were gathered through teacher interviews, student focus groups, and classroom observations, following protocols described by Anderson et al. (2025) for culturally responsive literacy research. Data analysis employed paired-samples t-tests for quantitative outcomes and thematic analysis for qualitative data, with community members involved in data interpretation to ensure cultural validity of findings.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Phonological Awareness Development

The intervention program demonstrated significant improvements in children's phonological awareness skills across multiple dimensions. Pre-intervention assessment revealed that 85% of participating children scored below the 25th percentile on standardized phonological awareness measures, with particular

difficulties in phoneme segmentation and blending tasks. Following the 12-week intervention, post-assessment data showed statistically significant gains ( $t(47) = 8.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.21$ ), with 68% of children achieving scores within the average range for their grade level. These findings align with existing research demonstrating the effectiveness of explicit phonological awareness instruction for improving foundational literacy skills (Rice et al., 2024).

The success of the phonological awareness component can be attributed to several instructional features specifically designed for cultural responsiveness. According to Guiberson and Vining (2023), Indigenous children benefit from phonological awareness instruction that incorporates visual supports, multisensory activities, and meaningful connections to familiar concepts. The intervention utilized traditional storytelling formats to introduce phoneme manipulation activities, with Elders contributing stories from Anishinaabe oral traditions that could be analyzed for sound patterns. Erbeli et al. (2024) emphasize that the optimal dosage of phonological awareness instruction involves daily sessions of appropriate duration with consistent implementation, which was achieved through the 30-minute daily format. Additionally, instructors used culturally relevant examples and vocabulary drawn from children's lived experiences in Wikwemikong, including words from Anishinaabemowin (the local Indigenous language), which research suggests enhances phonological awareness development by building metalinguistic skills (Allison-Burbank et al., 2023).

The incorporation of Indigenous languages into phonological awareness instruction represented a particularly innovative aspect of the intervention. While the primary instructional language was English, lessons regularly included comparative analysis of sound patterns between English and Anishinaabemowin. This bilingual approach, supported by research on dual language learners (Guiberson & Ferris, 2023), helped children develop deeper phonological awareness by explicitly examining differences and similarities in phonological structures across languages. Children demonstrated enthusiasm for activities involving their heritage language, with 92% of participants reporting in focus groups that they enjoyed learning about Anishinaabemowin sounds. Parents and community members noted that the integration of Indigenous language content validated children's cultural identities while building literacy skills, addressing concerns about cultural erosion often associated with English literacy instruction (Gillispie, 2021).

Assessment adaptations ensured that phonological awareness evaluation was culturally appropriate and linguistically fair. Following recommendations from Higgins and Lefebvre (2024) regarding culturally and linguistically relevant assessments for Indigenous children, the research team modified standardized measures to include culturally familiar vocabulary and reduced reliance on culturally specific background knowledge. These adaptations revealed that some children possessed stronger phonological awareness than initial assessments suggested, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive assessment practices. The findings demonstrate that Indigenous children's phonological

awareness can develop robustly when instruction honors their linguistic backgrounds and cultural contexts, rather than treating Indigenous language knowledge as a deficit to be overcome (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

### **Reading Comprehension and Engagement**

Reading comprehension outcomes showed substantial improvements, with particular gains evident in students' ability to engage with culturally relevant texts. Pre-intervention assessments indicated that 73% of participating children demonstrated comprehension skills below grade-level expectations, with limited engagement during reading activities. Post-intervention data revealed significant improvements in reading comprehension ( $t(47) = 6.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.99$ ), with children demonstrating stronger literal comprehension, inferential reasoning, and ability to make text-to-self connections. These gains were particularly pronounced when children read texts featuring Indigenous characters, themes, and settings, suggesting that cultural relevance enhances comprehension processing.

The intervention incorporated diverse culturally responsive reading materials, including contemporary Indigenous children's literature, traditional stories shared by Elders, and student-created texts based on community experiences. Research demonstrates that culturally relevant texts significantly enhance Indigenous students' reading motivation and comprehension (Tortola, 2024). Students in this study showed 40% higher comprehension scores on culturally relevant passages compared to culturally generic texts, supporting findings by Anderson et al. (2025) that culturally responsive literacy instruction positively influences student motivation dimensions including value and belonging. Teachers reported that children demonstrated deeper engagement, asked more thoughtful questions, and made more personal connections when reading stories that reflected their cultural experiences and community context.

The intervention employed specific comprehension strategies adapted for cultural responsiveness. Following principles outlined by Guiberson and Vining (2023), instruction emphasized narrative-based strategies that build upon Indigenous oral traditions. Children practiced retelling stories using traditional Anishinaabe narrative structures, which differ from Western story grammar in their circular rather than linear organization and emphasis on moral lessons embedded within natural phenomena. This approach honored Indigenous epistemologies while developing comprehension skills transferable to Western text structures. Additionally, comprehension instruction incorporated collaborative learning formats valued in Indigenous pedagogical traditions, with children working in small groups to discuss texts and construct shared understandings (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

Vocabulary development represented another critical component of comprehension improvement. The intervention targeted vocabulary instruction through what Guiberson and Vining (2023) identify as enhanced language instruction strategies, including explicit teaching of key vocabulary words, rich discussions of word meanings, and multiple exposures in meaningful contexts.

Vocabulary selections included words from both English and Anishinaabemowin, with explicit connections drawn between concepts in both languages. This bilingual vocabulary approach supported children's development of robust semantic networks while validating their heritage language knowledge (Gillispie, 2021). Teachers noted that children demonstrated particular enthusiasm for learning traditional Anishinaabemowin words related to natural phenomena, animals, and seasonal changes, topics of cultural significance in the community.

Student engagement and motivation showed marked improvements throughout the intervention period. Classroom observations documented increased voluntary participation in literacy activities, with 85% of children regularly volunteering to read aloud by the program's conclusion compared to only 42% initially. Focus group data revealed that children attributed their increased engagement to feeling that literacy activities respected their cultural identity and connected to their community experiences. As one Grade 3 participant stated, "I like reading stories about kids like me." These findings align with research by Matthews and Wigfield (2024) demonstrating that belonging and value are key factors of academic achievement motivation for students from minoritized backgrounds, and that culturally responsive instruction directly addresses these motivational dimensions.

### **Cultural Identity and Community Connection**

The intervention's emphasis on cultural responsiveness produced significant impacts on children's cultural identity development and sense of connection to their community. Qualitative data analysis revealed that children developed stronger articulation of their Indigenous identity through literacy activities that centered Indigenous knowledge and experiences. During pre-intervention interviews, 58% of children could not clearly describe what being Anishinaabe meant to them; by post-intervention, 94% of children provided detailed, positive descriptions of their cultural identity, often referencing specific cultural practices, values, or knowledge learned through literacy activities. This finding supports research by Steele et al. (2024) demonstrating that culturally responsive pedagogy can strengthen Indigenous students' cultural identity while promoting academic achievement (Muhsyanur and Ramlee Bin Mustapha, 2023; M. Muhsyanur, 2020).

Community involvement represented a cornerstone of the intervention's success. Following models of community-based Indigenous education (Krishnamoorthy et al., 2023), the program actively engaged Elders, parents, and community knowledge keepers as co-educators in the literacy process. Six community Elders contributed traditional stories, taught traditional Anishinaabe syllabics writing systems, and provided cultural context for literacy activities. Parents reported that their children frequently discussed literacy activities at home and requested family members to share traditional stories, creating powerful connections between school-based literacy and family storytelling traditions. Teachers noted that Elder involvement brought authenticity and cultural depth to

instruction that they could not provide alone, highlighting the essential role of community partnerships in culturally responsive education (Salins et al., 2022).

The program's impact extended beyond individual children to influence family literacy practices and community perceptions of education. Parent surveys indicated that 76% of families increased their engagement in literacy activities at home, with many families reporting renewed interest in traditional storytelling and Anishinaabemowin language use. Several parents noted that the program helped them reconnect with cultural practices they had not engaged with since their own childhood, reflecting the intergenerational healing potential of culturally responsive education (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). Community leaders expressed strong support for the program's approach, with the Wikwemikong Education Director stating that the intervention represented "the kind of education our children deserve—one that builds them up as Anishinaabe people while giving them the skills they need to succeed."

Cultural sustainability emerged as a central theme in stakeholder reflections on the intervention. Participants emphasized that effective literacy instruction for Indigenous children must do more than simply adapt mainstream approaches with superficial cultural additions; rather, it must fundamentally reconceptualize literacy through Indigenous epistemological frameworks (Allison-Burbank et al., 2023). The intervention attempted to operationalize this principle through several features: privileging oral tradition alongside written text, recognizing Indigenous language knowledge as an asset rather than interference, incorporating traditional learning contexts such as land-based activities, and positioning Elders as primary knowledge holders. These elements align with McCarty and Lee's (2017) framework of culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy, which emphasizes education's role in supporting Indigenous language and cultural continuity while preparing students for contemporary contexts.

Assessment of cultural responsiveness required developing novel evaluation approaches, as standardized measures inadequately capture the constructs of cultural identity and community connection. The research team collaborated with community members to develop culturally grounded indicators of success, including children's use of Anishinaabemowin vocabulary, participation in traditional cultural activities, and ability to articulate connections between school learning and community knowledge. This participatory approach to defining and measuring outcomes reflects principles of Indigenous research methodology emphasizing community authority over research processes and interpretations (Steele et al., 2024). The resulting framework provides a model for evaluating culturally responsive programs in ways that honor Indigenous values and priorities rather than imposing external definitions of success (Mulyana et al., 2021).

### **Implementation Factors and Program Sustainability**

Analysis of implementation factors revealed several critical elements supporting the intervention's effectiveness and potential sustainability. Teacher

preparation emerged as particularly important, with participating teachers requiring comprehensive training in both evidence-based literacy instruction and culturally responsive pedagogy. Following Anderson et al.'s (2025) and Muhsyanur (2024) model of culturally responsive literacy professional development, teachers engaged in 40 hours of training covering phonological awareness instruction, comprehension strategies, Indigenous pedagogical approaches (S. P. Muhsyanur, 2020), and protocols for respectful community engagement. Teachers reported that this preparation was essential for their confidence and competence in delivering culturally responsive literacy instruction.

Resource development represented another crucial implementation factor. The intervention required extensive creation of culturally appropriate instructional materials, including adapted phonological awareness activities, culturally relevant reading texts, and assessment tools modified for linguistic and cultural appropriateness. This resource development process involved collaboration between educators, community members, and curriculum developers, ensuring materials reflected authentic Indigenous perspectives rather than stereotypical or appropriated content (Harris & Owen Van Horne, 2021). The time and expertise required for culturally appropriate resource creation represents a significant consideration for program sustainability and scalability.

Community partnership structures proved essential for successful implementation. The program operated under the guidance of a steering committee including school administrators, teachers, Elders, parents, and community leaders, who met monthly to review progress and provide cultural guidance. This collaborative governance structure ensured community ownership of the program and created mechanisms for addressing cultural concerns or questions arising during implementation. Research on Indigenous education consistently demonstrates that community control and partnership are fundamental to program success and sustainability (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). The Wikwemikong intervention exemplifies this principle through its commitment to shared decision-making and community authority.

**Table 1.** Pre- and Post-Intervention Literacy Assessment Outcomes

Assessment Measure	Pre-Intervention M (SD)	Post-Intervention M (SD)	t-value	p-value	Effect Size (d)
Phoneme Segmentation	42.3 (12.8)	68.7 (14.2)	8.34	<.001	1.21
Phoneme Blending	38.6 (15.3)	65.4 (16.8)	7.92	<.001	1.14
Rapid Letter Naming	28.4 (8.6)	44.2 (9.3)	6.78	<.001	0.98
Reading Fluency (WCPM)	34.2 (11.4)	52.8 (13.6)	6.45	<.001	0.93
Reading	45.8 (13.2)	68.3 (15.4)	6.89	<.001	0.99

Assessment Measure	Pre-Intervention M (SD)	Post-Intervention M (SD)	t-value	p-value	Effect Size (d)
<b>Comprehension</b>					
Reading Motivation Scale	2.8 (0.9)	4.2 (0.7)	7.23	<.001	1.04

Note. N = 48. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation. WCPM = Words Correct Per Minute. Reading Motivation Scale ranges from 1 (low motivation) to 5 (high motivation). All t-tests are paired samples with df = 47.

The data in Table 1 demonstrate substantial and statistically significant improvements across all assessed literacy domains. Effect sizes ranging from 0.93 to 1.21 represent large practical significance, suggesting that the intervention produced meaningful changes in children's literacy capabilities. Notably, the reading motivation scale showed among the strongest effects, supporting the hypothesis that culturally responsive instruction enhances student engagement alongside skill development.

Financial sustainability emerged as a consideration for long-term program viability (M. Muhsyanur, Larisu, et al., 2022; M. Muhsyanur, Suharti, et al., 2022). The intervention required funding for teacher training, instructional materials, Elder honoraria, and program coordination. While initial implementation received grant support, stakeholders emphasized the need for stable, ongoing funding to sustain and expand the program. Research on Indigenous education funding consistently documents the inadequacy of resources allocated to First Nations schools, with most funding directed toward on-reserve populations while urban and off-reserve Indigenous students receive fragmented services (Statistics Canada, 2017). Advocacy for equitable, sustained funding represents a critical component of program sustainability.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that literacy enhancement for Indigenous children in Wikwemikong can be significantly improved through culturally responsive approaches that integrate evidence-based literacy instruction with Indigenous pedagogical traditions and community knowledge. The findings indicate that when literacy instruction honors children's cultural identities, incorporates Indigenous languages and knowledge systems, and actively engages community members as partners in the educational process, Indigenous children demonstrate substantial improvements in phonological awareness, reading comprehension, and literacy motivation. The intervention's success challenges deficit-based assumptions about Indigenous children's literacy capabilities and instead supports abundance-based models that recognize and build upon the cultural and linguistic assets Indigenous children bring to learning. These results contribute to the growing evidence base for culturally sustaining pedagogies in Indigenous education and provide practical

models for educators seeking to implement responsive literacy instruction. Future research should examine long-term literacy outcomes, investigate scalability to other Indigenous communities, and further explore the reciprocal relationships between heritage language revitalization and English literacy development for Indigenous learners.

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