



EFFECTIVE PRACTICES in Special Programs

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EARLY INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

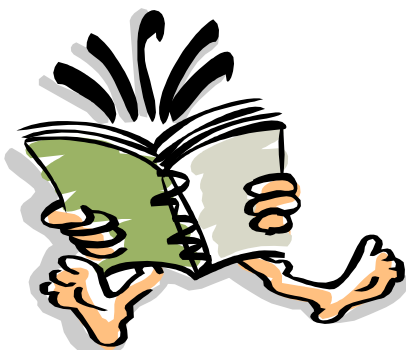
Early intervention is one of the best ways to identify children at risk and to provide support before problems arise or become difficult to address.

Alberta Learning supports school authorities in providing learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate. Some examples of Alberta Learning's support include:

- Program Unit Funding (PUF) to support children with severe disabilities in Early Childhood Service programs
- the Early Literacy Initiative for students in grades 1 and 2 who are experiencing difficulties with reading readiness and early literacy skills.

The focus of this issue of *Effective Practices in Special Programs* is on two preschool program approaches to early intervention.

- The Bright Beginnings program offered at Fairview School in Red Deer offers developmentally appropriate practices to preschool "children of promise."
- At Father J.A. Turcotte OMI School in Fort McMurray, an action research model is used to provide future elementary students with effective preschool programs via early intervention.



CURRENT RESEARCH ON DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PROGRAMS

Early childhood professionals with training in child development are aware of the need to support all aspects of child development. Early childhood programs provide activities and opportunities to support readiness for school in the preschool years.

- B Benefits extend to families and the community.
- E Enhanced development through guided play.
- G Growth as an individual is assessed.
- I Increased motivation to learn.
- N Needs for improved personal health are met.
- N Needs for involvement are felt by a community.
- I Improvements in educational outcomes.
- N Needs for increased development are met.
- G Growth of a community of learners.
- S Setting for mutually beneficial relationships.

CURRENT RESEARCH ON EARLY INTERVENTION THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

The action research approach to educational improvement, originally adopted in the 60s and 70s, is an important means of bringing the classroom teacher into the research process. Schools and districts that use action research recognize that teachers are the members of the learning community who can most effectively identify problems and find solutions. When schools and districts make the time to regularly work together to build the kind of learning community that is required by the action research model, the result is school improvement.

The action research model enables educators to create new opportunities to assess their teaching methodologies; test new ideas, methods and materials; incorporate re-evaluative strategies; and create new approaches to instruction and assessment.

BRIGHT BEGINNINGS PLAYSCHOOL PROGRAM, FAIRVIEW SCHOOL

Fairview School in Red Deer initiated the Bright Beginnings Playschool Program in the fall of 1997. The program was a result of the increasing number of students entering the school without the prerequisite language or social skills to be successful in a school setting.

“Due to the socio-economic make-up of the neighbourhood that Fairview School serves, many children were coming to Kindergarten/grade 1 with little or no literacy skills. At five or six years of age they were already substantially behind other children in their pre-reading skills. I remember one child who came to us in grade 1 who did not know which way was up in the book that she was reading.”

P. Langstraat, Former Principal

Which students are eligible for the program?

Families in which the parent(s) are not currently working or are working at low paying jobs and can not afford private playschool programs can access the Fairview Bright Beginnings Playschool Program. The majority of these families are referred to the preschool through social or community agencies. There also was an identified need to provide programs for Program Unit Funded children from all parts of Red Deer within the school facility. Bright Beginnings is funded by Alberta Learning's Program Unit Funding (PUF) and Red Deer Family and Community Support Services.

“Clearly there was a need for a free, quality preschool program. As a school staff, we had a number of advantages. We did not need to make a profit from the program. All of the resources we could gather could be directly applied to programming for these children. Since the program was to be supervised by a teacher and would be housed in a school, the personnel in the program could benefit from the shared knowledge and resources available.”

P. Langstraat, Former Principal

What were Bright Beginnings' Goals?

Goals identified by school administration were based on the identified needs of the children, including the following.

- Providing preschool children with the opportunity to become successful learners prior to entering school.
- Accessing and identifying children who required intervention services such as speech-language, physical and occupational therapy.
- Increasing positive parental involvement in the school.
- Building partnerships to bridge services for parents and children.



Program Structure

- The Bright Beginnings Program is offered to children either four mornings or four afternoons per week and is housed in the primary wing of Fairview School.
- The group size does not exceed 15, with a maximum of 5 – 6 Program Unit Funded (PUF) children per group.
- Programming is designed to include whole group activities, free play, structured centre time, snack time and physical education in the school gym or school playground.
- The focus is on consistency in routines and expectations, facilitated interactions with peers, and developmentally appropriate social skills and activities. This focus enhances the development of oral language and a broad experiential language base.
- An added enhancement to the program is the direct involvement of the speech-language pathologist and professionals from the Support Team for Assessment, Rehabilitation, and Training (START), who work with the students with special needs.

How are parents involved?

Parents are encouraged to volunteer as helpers in the program and to assist on field trips. Bright Beginnings staff members are available before and after sessions to discuss parenting and child development concerns, and regular formal conferences are scheduled. The school's community worker assists parents in accessing educational programs or supports such as: parenting/personal development courses available through Family Services and the Central Alberta Women's Outreach Society; play groups/parenting support through Preschool Wellness; and assistance available from the Food Bank and Food Co-op.

What are the measures of success for Bright Beginnings?

The annually reported measures of success are indicated by the following:

- anecdotal notes and records related to a child's progress and prepared by playschool staff
- annual parent surveys (both programs)

- oral reports from parents (daily and regularly scheduled conferences)
- feedback from referring agencies
- reports from receiving teachers
- number of parents volunteering and/or taking part in school-based activities.

"It's been amazing to see the difference in the confidence these children are now entering Kindergarten with. Has Bright Beginnings made a difference for them? Absolutely – it has. I have a special needs background and the boost the program gives these kids is really noticeable."

Kindergarten Teacher

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FATHER J. A. TURCOTTE OMI SCHOOL FORT MCMURRAY CATHOLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT Q AND A'S

In the late 1990s, staff at the Father J. A. Turcotte OMI School in Fort McMurray found that many students were entering grade 1 without appropriate literacy skills. The administration, along with the classroom support teacher and Kindergarten teacher began the process of researching early intervention models and methods for providing their future elementary students with effective preschool programs.

What challenges did the team face?

1. Find a way of housing a preschool-like setting right in the school.
2. Determine which children were delayed due to lack of literacy in their environment and which were students with special needs.
3. Ensure that "delayed" students received the intervention to enter grade 1 with the literacy skills necessary to be successful.
4. Identify and provide individualized programming for students with mild/moderate and severe disabilities.
5. Reduce teacher stress.

What were the research team's key learnings?

- It is a good practice to include children who receive PUF in the regular classroom. Since the program could be accessed free of charge, community children also attended the program to act as "role models" for the PUF children.
- The school partnered with contracted speech-language pathologists to focus on developing oral language skills.

How was the Early Entry Program designed?

- The program was directed by a classroom support teacher who was assisted by a speech-language consultant.
- The program was taught by a teacher assistant with a preschool background.
- The room was designated for half-day preschool programming.

How were students identified?

- The minimum age for PUF must be 2 years 6 months by September 1. The community children also had to be at least that age.
- Children who attended Wellness days were identified as candidates for the program, usually for ECS mild/moderate or Program Unit Funding. The Wellness days are collaborative efforts with the Regional Health Authority, a speech-language pathologist, a special education teacher, the parent and the child.

What criteria were developed to identify children for the program?

- During 1999/2000, the first year of the program, community response was very positive, but the demand for the program exceeded the number of spaces.
- During the second year, the program went full-time.
- It became evident that a criteria for inclusion into the program was needed, as well as an increase in time to accommodate the number of students being assessed as mild/moderate or PUF.
- A checklist for Early Entry Program for pre-requisite skills for ALL students, based on the Brigance Inventory of Early Development, was created and implemented during the first year.
- Designed for use with children below the developmental level of age 7, this inventory identifies a child's specific strengths and weaknesses in pre-ambulatory motor skills, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, self-help skills, pre-speech, speech and language, reading readiness and basic math.
- The program team held monthly team meetings to reflect on the program in an effort to mitigate and overcome challenges for students, teachers and parents.
- The mild/moderate numbers increased and the staff often noted that the children had other disabilities even though children were initially identified as having mild/moderate disabilities in the areas of speech.
- With the changes to ECS mild/moderate funding, the Early Entry Program budget was becoming self-supporting.
- The teachers were feeling less stress as they saw the benefits and growth in the students, the number of students entering Kindergarten with

age appropriate literacy levels was on the rise, and the possibility of delayed students reaching grade level literacy was becoming a reality.

“Because of the successes we have seen, things like consistent average growth of 14-16 months in 8 months, our teachers realize no child is hopeless. Their stress is reduced because they can see where the child really is and where they have the potential to be. We weren't doing that before because we had so many students who were delayed mixed in with the students who were truly mild/moderate that the teachers were overwhelmed. The Early Entry Program has helped correct that situation.”

Kim Jenkins, Former Principal

- For 2001/2002 (the program's third year) Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS), PUF and ECS mild/moderate funding were combined to hire a certificated teacher.
- The revised goal for this school year was to get the grade 1 students to read at a mid-grade 1 to completed grade 1 level.
- The school will be tracking this first set of alumni to determine:
 - if the revised goal is a reality
 - if the original goal of grade 3 competency will be reached by their sixth year of intervention (including 3 years in the Early Entry Program and grades 1 – 3 with direct reading instruction through a pull-out program).

“The gap is shrinking because students are being reached sooner and are receiving the skills to be successful, but we needed to train others to carry on the program. The quality of this program must stay in place, no matter who's leading it. This has to be in place for the next generation of children. For that reason we have initiated a “customized program” outlining principles, goals, expectations and outcomes for our Early Entry Program students.”

Valerie Dyck, Classroom Support Teacher

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WHAT DO THE EXPERTS SAY?

About creating a community of learners:

“A good school is a place where everyone is teaching and everyone is learning – simultaneously, under the same roof. Students are teaching and learning; principals are teaching and learning; teachers are teaching and learning.”

Barth, Roland S. (1990). *Improving schools from within: Teachers, parents, and principals can make the difference*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

About Action Research Stages:

Action research is a dynamic process.

Plan	A plan is made for some form of intervention or strategy within a program.
Action	The intervention/strategy is initiated and monitored.
Observation	Observations are made, collected and compiled.
Reflection	Intervention strategies are adjusted, and the process repeats itself until the program or practice is at its optimum effectiveness.

*Kemmis cited in Hopkins, D. (1985). *A Teacher's guide to classroom research*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

About establishing a positive and mutually beneficial relationship between children and their families:

“A significant body of research indicates that when parents participate in their children's education, the result is an increase in student achievement and an improvement of students' attitudes. Increased attendance, fewer discipline problems, and higher aspirations also have been correlated with an increase in parent involvement.”

Henderson, A. T., & Berla, N. (1994). *A New generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement*. St. Louis, MO: Danforth Foundation and Flint, MI: Mott (C. S.) Foundation.

Olmstead, P. P., & Rubin, R. I. (1983). “Linking parent behaviors to child achievement,” *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 8 (1983) 317-325.

About enhanced development and learning through guided play:

“If you invite children to participate in work and play, you give them many more ways to grow and learn. By matching your expectations to their abilities, encouraging and approving their efforts, and allowing plenty of time for the performance of each task, you can give your young children many opportunities to learn and grow through work.”

Readdick, Christine A., Douglas, Kathy (2000). “More than line leader and door holder: Engaging young children in real work.” *Young Children* 55(6), 63-70.

About providing developmentally appropriate curriculum:

“When we plan developmentally appropriate activities for children, they will attend to them, work hard, and learn.”

Bredenkamp, S. & Rosegrant, T. (1992). *Reaching potential: Appropriate curriculum and assessment for young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Effective Practices in Special Programs is a newsletter developed in response to the Special Education Review Recommendations #51-52 identified in *Shaping the Future for Students with Special Needs* (November 2000). Each issue includes a summary of current research on a topic and resources or featured school(s) in Alberta that have developed and implemented effective practices.

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