



## 2012-2013 AESN Inquiry Case Study

**School Name:** William Konkin Elementary School

**District:** Nechako-Lakes #91

**Inquiry Team Members:** Dave Beck, Patty Bursey, Melissa Evans,  
Paula Laurie, Lorraine McFarland, Marian Mills,  
Erin Thiessen, Colleen West

**AEEA Goal Area:** Improve literacy for all Aboriginal learners.

### **Question/Focus:**

We will focus on improving the quality of oral expression among our students.

How will structured opportunities to engage in A/B partner talk improve oral language and affect reading fluency and comprehension as measured by the oral language and reading performance standards?

### **Scanning:**

We noticed that...

- students often use gestures rather than speaking.
- many students show a paucity of vocabulary.
- in both oral and written responses, students often use one-word or short-phrase responses without elaboration. Many rarely use complete sentences.
- reading fluency and comprehension are weak.
- descriptive language is weak for our many ESD students.
- most of our students are unable to sustain academic conversations.
- students demonstrate poor listening skills.
- in the face of challenges, students exhibit resilience and perseverance.

### **Focus:**

We are focusing on improving the quality of oral expression among our students. We consider this important because the ability to articulate ideas orally is foundational to effective relationships with others, to written expression, and to the ability to express understanding in reading and the content areas.

### **Hunch:**

What is leading to this situation for our learners?

- Lack of modeling, exposure, practice and opportunities for extended conversations.
- Lack of understanding of criteria for being a good reader or about quality of oral conversation and oral and written responses.
- Little consistency regarding explicit teaching of strategies/criteria.
- Cultural: English is the second language of many of our students. Their English is strewn with dialect variations from their own Carrier language.
- We wonder if the use of purposeful structured partner talk will improve oral expression and have a collateral impact on reading fluency and comprehension.

### **New professional learning:**

We formed a book study group within our Literacy Meetings using the book Knee to Knee, Eye to Eye: Circling in on Comprehension as a means of meeting the following goals:

- Study resources related to criteria setting and learning intentions.
- Study resources related to A/B partners
- Study how to co-construct criteria with students.
- Learn and try strategies and questions to use for purposeful structured talk.
- Establish a group for discussing our learning and sharing ideas and classroom experiences/observations with each other.

### **Taking action:**

1. Proposal committee met to clarify: What would we like to do? Why is it important? What might it look like?
2. Made proposal to staff to get participant commitment to the project.
3. Workload issues expressed by colleagues, and limits to meeting/collaboration time, led us to using a portion of our monthly literacy meetings for discussion and book study related to partner talk rather than create a new set of meeting times.
4. Since we started our project in January, we realized that professional learning about partner talk would comprise a large part of our focus for this year and we would need to continue our project next year to really go deep enough changing our practice in our classrooms and make a difference for kids.
5. Each participant committed to participating in the book study and to trying partner talk strategies with their students. At our literacy meetings we have reported back to each other about the partner talk and oral language activities that we were trying and how it was going.

### **Checking:**

Teachers have been using partner-talk experiences to construct partner-talk criteria within their classrooms. They report that they needed more time to refine their criteria and move beyond the basics (knee to knee, eye contact, turn taking, on topic) and develop skills that would improve the quality of partner talk (prompting, questioning, clarifying, elaborating, piggybacking, connecting, extending). Teachers reported that students were becoming more comfortable conversing with their partners and were able to sustain conversations on topic for longer periods. Most still require directions from the teacher about which questions/prompts to use to illicit responses from their partners. Teachers felt that students need more time and practice before progress in oral language skills will be measurable on their criteria and performance standard rubrics.

### **Sources for baseline evidence:**

Kindergarten Assessment, PM Benchmarks, DART

**Monitoring impact?:** We looked at Kindergarten Assessment, PM Benchmarks, DART assessments as well as teacher informal observations and anecdotal reports of change noticed over the course of the inquiry so far. (See attached chart showing results from some assessments)

### **Did we make a difference? Some teacher reflections:**

- “The students have become much more comfortable speaking with their partners or to the larger class/group.”
- “I have experienced many less “I don’t know” and many more valuable conversations.”
- “The students are now able to both describe their own thoughts and discuss what others have shared.”

- “Partner talk is providing an opportunity for all children to speak and listen to each other and voice their ideas and understanding instead of just those who volunteer or are called upon.”
- “We have learned that partner talk is a very effective tool for enhancing students’ language and vocabulary development, their enjoyment and understanding of materials, and show their creative and critical thinking skills.”
- “Now that they are comfortable sharing their thoughts with partners I see that I need to show them how certain questions they can use may help them to prompt their partner to provide more details and extend/elaborate on their initial responses which still tend to be brief.”

### **Reflections/Advice:**

- In order to be successful, many of our students required support to develop schema and background understandings prior to engaging in partner talk.
- When effective conversation skills are explicitly modeled and practiced students improve in their ability to express ideas, listen to others, and participate effectively in undirected academic conversations.
- Formative feedback and student reflection on their conversations is helpful for developing conversations skills.
- Partner talk facilitates relationship and community building within the classroom.
- It takes time, modeling, and practice with formative feedback and reflection to develop partner and conversation skills. Next year, we will start in September in order to provide our students with sufficient opportunity to practice and develop those skills.
- To increase conversation skills, we plan to utilize partner talk activities in all subject areas.
- As we move forward into next year, we want to establish better ways of measuring student progress. We would like to use our classroom partner-talk rubrics to pull-out/develop a set of common criteria/descriptors that we could track across all classes in order to provide us with progress monitoring data more specifically focused directly on the oral language/partner talk skills. We are interested in how progress in oral language skills may impact other areas such as reading and writing. It is our hunch that we may be able to see corresponding improvements in comprehension and written expression among those students who show improvements in oral language / partner talk skills.

***EVERY learner crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options.***

## Indicators of Improvement

### Kindergarten Assessment Results: Oral Language

Fully Meeting Expectations Fall 2012	Fully Meeting Expectations Spring 2013
78%	92%

### PM Benchmark Results (Current Grade 2 Cohort)

Fully Meeting Expectations <i>(minimally meeting excluded)</i> Spring 2012	Fully Meeting Expectations <i>(minimally meeting excluded)</i> Spring 2013
Gr. 1 Year - 56%	Gr. 2 Year - 68% (same students)

### D.A.R.T. Overall Score Results for Grades 3-7\*

FALL 2012	Spring 2013
66%	92%

*\*Where appropriate, Special Education students were exempted from this assessment in accordance with their IEP.*