

Joyful Literacy Interventions

Janet N Mort PhD on an innovative
Early Intervention Approach

Following a career as a teacher, school administrator, and superintendent, Janet N. Mort, PhD returned to university to research why so many learners struggle with literacy throughout school. Studying with international experts, she formulated and field-tested a new **Joyful Literacy Intervention** for K/1 and other early primary students. In 2018/2019 Dr. Mort continues this work in several BC school districts and three Indigenous schools.

Our BC kindergarten entrants: Who are they?

Approximately 68% of kindergarten entrants are eager to learn, already reading, socially responsible, emotionally comfortable, physically healthy, verbally conversant, and creatively motivated (HELP, 2016). They graduate successfully with little or no interventions. They were well prepared for school in their daycares or homes.

But HELP* reports that approximately 32.2% of kindergarten entrants are vulnerable. Many have social issues, are emotionally fragile, have undiagnosed medical conditions, and are not able to speak, or have had no experiences with literacy. Without immediate, high quality, strategic interventions, these children typically struggle with the results of these burdens for a lifetime.

The school system works valiantly to get these children off to a great start, but our school services are stretched to their limits to meet these growing needs.

What can we do to change the trajectory for these vulnerable learners? Our Joyful Literacy Intervention strategy is working.

Experts like Dr. Richard Allington and Dr. Clyde Hertzman have provided research that demonstrates at least 90% of kindergarten children are capable and developmentally ready to read: They propose that the remaining 10% may have medically diagnosed conditions that interfere with learning. The NELP (2009) report^{2*} confirms this position. It unequivocally states that no matter what experiences children have lived through in their pre-school years, they are capable of success in

literacy as soon as they enter school. Allington and Hertzman are clear that whatever the early childhood experiences, these children are ready to succeed in school.

The NELP Report (2009) identifies six factors that promise success for five-year olds and their future literacy development:

1. Alphabet Knowledge;
2. Phonological Awareness;
3. High Frequency Words (RAN);
4. Shared Reading and Shared Writing;
5. Family Involvement; and
6. Fluency Development.

It is imperative that we begin to address their skill gaps in school immediately.

Research to action

I returned to university in a PhD program in Literacy and Early Learning to understand why so many children struggle with literacy and overall school success no matter how hard we try to make a difference. Working with Dr. Clyde Hertzman at UBC, we identified a body of powerful research leading to the development of a new intervention strategy for early learners.

We needed a school district partner with enthusiastic school administrators.

It was essential to have a school district partner to move from research to practice. Leslie Lambie (Peace River South, Superintendent), responded with more than 60 volunteer teachers to begin Joyful Literacy Intervention implementation in 2014. All

* <http://earlylearning.ubc.ca/media/edibc2016provincialreport.pdf>

^{2*} <https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/NELPReport09.pdf>

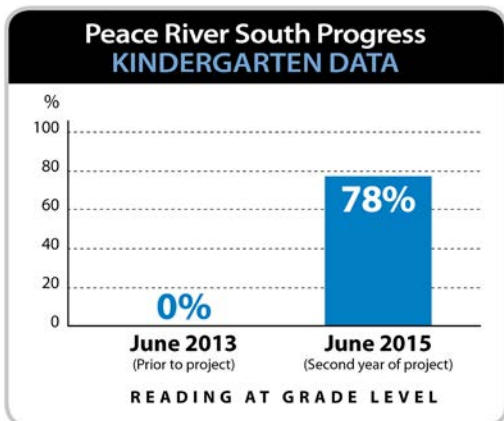


FIGURE 1

(Source: Fountas and Pennell data)

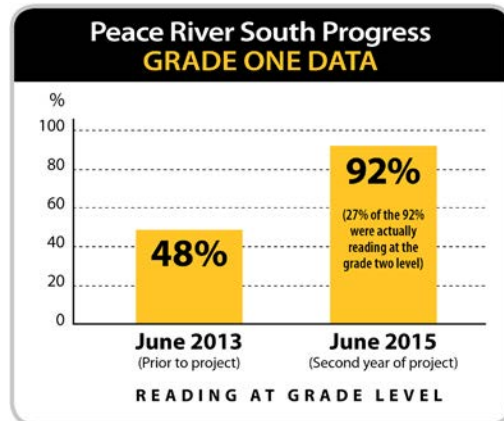


FIGURE 2

(Source: Fountas and Pennell data)

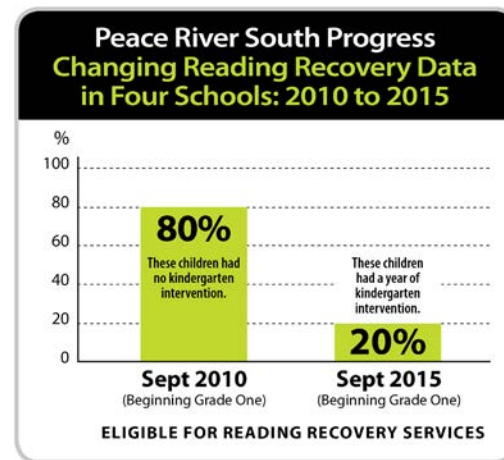


FIGURE 4

(Source: Reading Recovery Data)

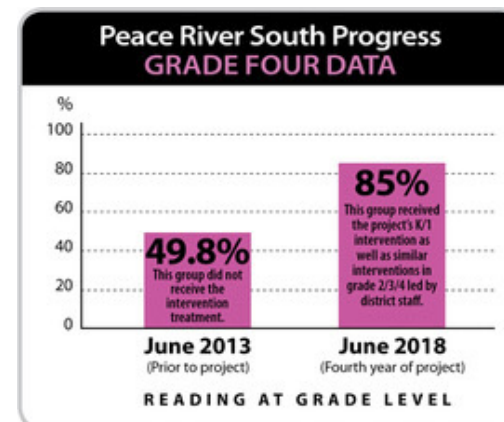


FIGURE 3

(Source: Fountas and Pennell data)

school administrators committed to implementing and leading the project. In a nutshell, how did we achieve such success?

Working intensely with classroom teachers, school leaders and district staff through a series of four capacity-building sessions each year, we created an action research culture. Staff used their own Professional Learning Community experiences each month to further support their learning. Principals played a pivotal role attending each event and leading school implementation teams. An assessment and tracking tool (The Circle Charts) was implemented at the outset: The Blitzing strategy was designed and implemented to close gaps for small groups of children who had similar skill needs. Skill gaps closed quickly in this highly motivating games-based structure. Research into practice was achieving success!

At each step of the process we kept close track of data. In all cases, vulnerable children exceeded expectations.

How does the project affect Student Services/ Special Education?

The Blitz strategy targets Tier 2 children, catching them before they fall further behind and providing intervention in cross-grade groups in an efficient and play-based way. Challenges faced by Tier 2 children are addressed through the Blitz, leaving Special Education services to focus on those who face more complex challenges.

Figure 3 describes the changing special services issue articulately: In 2010 staff members were overwhelmed with the caseload and frustrated with the many needs they couldn't meet. In 2015, Joyful Literacy Interventions had already addressed the needs of many of the children. Reading Recovery teachers suddenly had a manageable workload.

Will the K/1 growth sustain itself over time?

Peace River South made it a point to continue the research-based professional development through grades 2 and 3 in subsequent years, and have now moved into the intermediate years and have become self-sufficient as far as staff development. They have been inspired by the success being demonstrated by the 2017/2018 grade 4 class that began in the Joyful Literacy Intervention strategy in 2014. Results are heartening. Life chances are changing!

What successes are we having with Indigenous Schools?

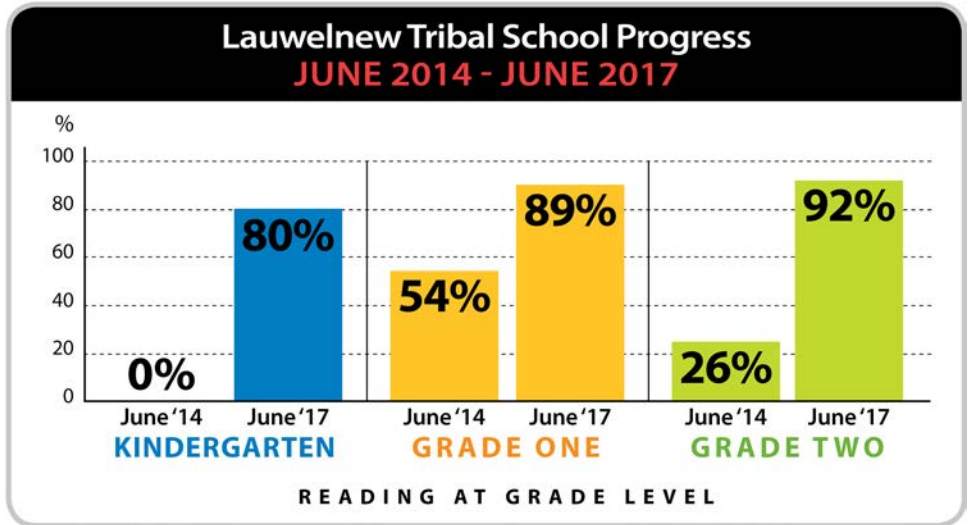
The Lauwelnew Tribal School in Saanich implemented the Joyful Literacy Interventions project three years ago. After three years in the project, (K to 2) 92% of the grade two children were reading at grade level (PM Benchmarks).

What is next for the 2018/19 school year?

Our Joyful Literacy team has partnered with two more Indigenous Schools and three more BC School Districts to implement Joyful Literacy Interventions. While school district and school-wide implementations are most effective statistically, any classroom teacher or team of teachers can implement in local projects. The Joyful Literacy Summits are

a great way for individuals and teams to proceed with confidence. If you are interested in more information about the Summits, there are two upcoming Summits focused on the K/1 strategy, email joyfulliteracy@shaw.ca. The Peace River South story is described in my two books and available on Amazon <http://bit.ly/JaNaMo>

Finally ... My heartfelt thanks to the leadership and staff in Peace River South (SD No. 59) and the Lauwelnew Tribal School who had the courage to take the risk and lead the way for vulnerable children. You have made a joyful difference in their young lives!



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