Education for Aboriginal children has undergone several changes in recent years. The residential school period has had numerous consequences for families and children, including the loss of their identity and of their mother tongue. Today, education is the responsibility of communities and many have chosen to educate kindergarten children in an Aboriginal language, among others in the Atikamekw community involved in this study. The discovery of writing, that is to say, reading and writing, begins in family environments and continues in preschool. Atikamekw teachers must continue to engage children in writing in the Native language despite the lack of books and teaching materials in Atikamekw available to them. Educational interventions based on oral language, including symbolic play, help foster children’s development in the emergence of writing. This research therefore focuses on the documentation of Atikamekw teachers’ role in preschool to promote introduction to writing of children through symbolic play.

CONTEXT

The Atikamekw community concerned uses the Ministry of Education of Quebec preschool education program. Teachers adapt it to their needs and culture. This program focuses on the development of six skills, including the ability to communicate using the language resources. For children to develop this skill, teachers are implementing educational interventions to support them in learning situations (MEQ, 2001). The program suggests that they make connections between oral and written, to recognize the usefulness of writing, to explore concepts, written language conventions and symbols, explore different forms of spontaneous writing, and to get children to imitate the reader and the writer’s behaviour. These strategies are part of the current emergence of writing. This term refers to the early childhood period (0–6 years). It is during this period that children develop skills in reading and writing before a more formal learning, before entering school, interacting with adults about writing within their family and community environment and in early childhood organizations, including preschool (Giasson, 2011).

The preschool education program emphasizes the importance of playing, including symbolic play, to get children to develop skills. In the symbolic play, children create an imaginary situation, play a character and invent rules according to their needs: for instance, a child plays the role of a doctor and proposes to operate on a patient who has been in the waiting room for a few minutes. Symbolic play closely connects with the emergence of writing (Jacob, Charron & da Silveira, 2015 a). In this form of play, children use spoken language, a component of the emergence of writing, to signify to their partners their intentions or mental representations: for example, they will mention to another child that a block becomes a hospital bed within their play context. By practising this form of language, children shape their mental representations, which would help their symbols of writing representa-
tions (Roskos and Neuman 1998). Indeed, the process of using forms of mental representations in symbolic play, by changing the function of objects, playing a role or make-believe, for example, is the same used to understand the meaning of the written code. Thus, the emergence of writing and symbolic play both require the ability to use words, gestures or images to represent objects.

Again, symbolic play scenarios allow children to develop their narrative skills: they learn the beginning, middle, and end of a story, similar to writing a book. The children invent a story according to the theme of the game and thus enrich their vocabulary, which is an asset for the emergence of writing development. When teachers support children in their pretend play scenarios, they lead them to the highest, or mature, level of symbolic play; this complex level of play, including rich vocabulary, contributes to the emergence of writing development (Bodovra and Leong, 2009, 2012).

The need to document the role of teachers in early childhood education, to promote the emergence of writing in a symbolic play context in different cultures, is a need felt in Anglo-Saxon, scientific literature (Roskos and Neuman, 1993; Saracho, 2002). Furthermore, a misconception of symbolic play and emergence of writing, a lack of training in this regard in initial or continuing education, and a lack of time to enrich the play corners also warrant a need for training among teachers (Boudreau and Charron, 2014).

Aboriginal teachers face the same concerns. Some teachers participating in this study could not have access to a university education, which reinforces the need to support them in their practice (Jacob, Charron & da Silveira, 2015b). Moreover, in the community concerned, teachers would like to receive training with regard to the Training Program for Quebec Schools and carry out interventions to stimulate oral and written language in Atikamekw children. The themes of symbolic play and the emergence of writing thus joined the concerns of these Atikamekw teachers. The purpose of this study, based on the need for training of the latter, is to better understand the role of teachers to promote the emergence of writing in a symbolic play context.

STUDY DESCRIPTION

A collaborative research was conducted with three Atikamekw teachers1. All three of them have diverse backgrounds: the first earned a Bachelor in Preschool and Elementary Education and has six years of experience in early childhood education; the second holds an Attestation of Collegial Studies in Early Childhood Education and has six years of experience in early childhood education; and the third does not have a post-secondary diploma but has no experience as a preschool teacher. Collaborative research combines the expertise of a researcher and practitioners to promote the professional development of the latter (Desgagnés, 2001). The project was achieved in three stages. In the first step, that of cosituation, I negotiated the project theme with participants and conducted semi-structured interviews with them to better understand the initial situation of their classroom. The second stage, that of co-operation, was the implementation of the project. This one took place in four iterative planning loops, put into practice in the classroom and of reflective analysis. The meeting allowed the teachers to plan the play corner and think about their role in facilitating the emergence of writing. During the practice, the teachers were playing with the children in their classroom in the new play corner area. Then, a group discussion was held with them to reflect and explain their practice. In total, four play corners enriched with writing material were organized: the restaurant, the hospital, construction, and hunting. For example, the hunting corner was equipped with magazines, books and written words such as “tent”, “name of animals”, “tools” and “hunt”. Paper and pencils were also made available to children. For each of the corners, the preferred spoken and written language was Atikamekw. The third stage, that of coproduction corresponded to the development of symbolic play corners, but also to the collaborative research results and professional development of teachers, especially about the emergence of writing and symbolic play.

RESULTS

The results showed that Atikamekw preschool teachers, with a play corner equipped with writing material, adopt several roles to promote the development of oral and written languages. Remember that spoken language is a component of the emergence
of writing. This is a description of three roles and a few examples below.

1) Guide: As a guide, teachers plan interesting activities, adjust the game environment, and organize the materials needed for the children to play. Several strategies, including the following five, are used by teachers.

a) Plan the game: Teachers support children in the planning of their game and to embody the characters in order to bring them to mature symbolic play. For instance, Teacher A helps children from the beginning of the game in the construction area, to adopt roles, that of an electrician, plumber or architect: "At first, I was building. Then, I also proposed to children to be such and such. That’s what I did, [...] so they know what [sic] roles are in there" (Teacher A, 24/03/15).

b) Associate words to images: In the restaurant corner, teachers help children associate words with images from the menu; in the hospital corner, they show the parts of the body on a poster; in the hunting corner, they point at animal names with their corresponding image. Teacher B stresses the children’s satisfaction for reading: "They were happy to read. Because of [sic] pictures of animals" (Teacher B, 4/22/15).

c) Being a model writer: In this strategy, the teachers write and are writer models. This strategy is used mainly for writing numbers and letters. The researcher supports teachers in their practice for writing words or sentences. For example, in the construction corner, Teacher C emphasizes: “What I did, I wrote, say, cheques [...] and the children chose the numbers and me, I wrote them [sic]’ (Teacher C, 15/04/15). When teachers write words, as the researcher suggested, they are in French. The exception remains the hunting corner where teachers write, in a notebook, the names of animals in Atikamekw.

d) Reading words: This strategy is less used by teachers when the words displayed in the play corner appear without images. Reading words is sometimes done to the detriment of symbolic play. Teacher B explains her difficulties using this strategy: ‘Do I play the teacher’s role? I had trouble to tell myself, “OK, you now play the teacher’s role,” on my own. Do I stop playing?’ (Teacher B, 1/29/15).

e) Encouraging children to write: This strategy is often used and is spread mainly through writing numbers or names. Teacher A explains how it encourages a child to write, in his role as a doctor: ‘One of the children took the temperature of another child. I said, “Write the number that appears” and I said to the child, “you will take note of the next appointment.” And [sic] then, he pretended to write.’ (Teacher A, 17/0215)

2) Storyteller: In this role, the teacher reads or tells a story to children with a book as support, asks questions, and helps them to predict events (Sarascho, 2002). Teachers read books to children, especially in the hunting corner. Three reasons explain this situation. First, the tent is a gathering place; Teacher B confirms: “Getting attention is easier in the tent” (teacher B, 4/22/15). Then, the books are written in Atikamekw. When written in French, Teacher A “finds it difficult. The story, I have read it before; I translate after” (Teacher A, 10/12/14). Finally, teachers have probably accumulated experience. For instance, in the third play corner, Teacher A does not read the story to children during the play period and wonders how to introduce the book: “I looked it over on my own. It was to see what I could do with it” (reflexive, Teacher A, 3/24/15). In the fourth game theme, this same teacher reads passages from books to children. Teacher B also notes this conclusion: ‘I also had more experience’ (teacher B, 13/05/15).

3) Mediator: In the role of mediator, teachers ensure to mediate between children and activities, equipment and instructions, to maximize children’s learning. To keep the interest of the latter in symbolic play, teachers use a strategy: they model the way the game themes can be linked. For example, Teacher B establishes the link between the restaurant and hospital theme. During the exercise, she sits in the restaurant holding two dolls in her arms. They fall to the ground. She suggested the children to go to the hospital "But my babies, they fell. I had the idea of proposing to call the ambulance [...] I suggested; they complied” (Teacher B, 1/29/15).

This teacher’s spontaneous strategy encourages children to develop their scenario in symbolic play; it helps them reach a level of mature and complex symbolic play and also supports their spoken language, a component of the emergence of writing.
This research has made it possible to add relevant information about the roles of the three Atikamekw preschool teachers to promote the emergence of writing using symbolic play. It shows that these roles are similar to previous studies (Bodovra and Leong, 2012; Saracho, 2002), even with the little training experience that teachers have on themes of symbolic play and the emergence of writing. However, some peculiarities regarding language use are justified by the cultural context: for example, teachers sometimes use French for certain words in oral and writing, especially when the play theme is slightly similar to their culture, which was the case with the construction theme.

To promote the emergence of writing in context of symbolic play, the dilemma between “play” and “teach” concepts related to writing is also a matter raised by the teachers.

Moreover, the role of the storyteller is sometimes missing depending on the play theme. Reading books in French seems more difficult to achieve for teachers because of the simultaneous translation they need to do during reading. To promote the emergence of writing in context of symbolic play, the dilemma between “play” and “teach” concepts related to writing is also a matter raised by the teachers. Previous research confirms the importance of remaining in the play character to allow children to further improve their spoken and written languages (Meacham, Vukelich, Han and Buell, 2013). For instance, a teacher talks about writing to children by remaining in her character as a waitress in a restaurant, by reading what is on the menu or by pointing the words on the placemat. Using this form of language, she makes sure to keep the children’s interest in the symbolic play and in the emergence of writing activity. Finally, note that one of the strengths of this research is the use of collaborative research in Aboriginal communities, which has enabled professional development of teachers in the area of the emergence of writing and symbolic play as well the development of symbolic play corners enriched writing material for three preschool classrooms. Further research would be relevant to know the benefits of the symbolic play approach on the development and knowledge on emergence of writing of Aboriginal children attending preschool.

NOTE

1 To respect the participants’ privacy, the name of the community will not be released.

REFERENCES


