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## FOSTERING THE EMERGENCE OF WRITING IN A SYMBOLIC PLAY CONTEXT: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF A COLLABORATIVE STUDY IN ATIKAMEKW COMMUNITIES

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-





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, 17/02/15)

**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 (Sarach, 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.

