AN ACTION RESEARCH TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS WORKING IN INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTS

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Introduction and Background

In April 2017, a book fair was organized in an elementary school in Abitibi-Témiscamingue as part of an action research entitled Soutenir le développement professionnel d'enseignantes du primaire pour améliorer les pratiques d'enseignement et d'évaluation de la lecture et de l'écriture en contexte autochtone, à l'ère des technologies de l'information et de la communication (TIC)1. The event—a huge success!—has generated such enthusiasm for reading in the school that it will be renewed in October 2018. In this article, we present the background and the problematic at the origin of the action research and we identify the conditions of its successful implementation, focusing on the methodological framework supporting this project.

Let us first mention that the adventure began in 2012, when Professor Yvonne da Silveira, from Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT), obtained a grant from the Fonds de recherche québécois sur la société et la culture (FRQSC) to conduct an action research in two Indigenous communities (Da Silveira, Maheux, Blaser, Paul, Marca Vadan, & Dumas, 2015; Blaser, Maheux, Kistabish, & da Silveira, 2016), one of which is Pikogan, near Amos. Four women from the community, education professionals, participated in this first action research: Julie Mowatt, Pedagogical Advisor, Marguerite Mowatt, a retired teacher, and two teachers from the school. Focusing on writing, Ms. da Silveira’s action research made it possible to experiment different models of accompaniment for teachers in the implementation of new writing practices in the classroom. In the end, the project revealed new training needs clearly expressed by school teachers, thus arousing interest in conducting a second action research, this time in the community of Pikogan only, and in collaboration with a renewed Research Team, under the responsibility of Christiane Blaser, Université de Sherbrooke. Focusing on the professional development of teachers in reading, writing and reading and writing assessment, the
The second project aims, on the one hand, to offer customized training sessions to the ten or so teachers of école Migwan and, on the other hand, to equip all classrooms—from Kindergarten to Grade 6—with “literature corners”, pleasantly furnished spaces filled with numerous books and stationery material available for the school’s 110 or so students.

The development of literacy - the ability to use writing (reading and writing) to be at ease in contemporary society - is at the heart of action research since, in a literate society, writing is the mainstay of learning in all school subjects and is also a determining factor in the pursuit of education. Even though, over the past 40 years, Indigenous educational success and perseverance have improved, the number of First Nations people living in Quebec who have no certificate, diploma or degree still stands at 46.3% compared to 24.8% among non-Indigenous population (MELS, 2009). This means that it is important to act in this environment, especially in elementary school.

The course of the action research

To understand how the project unfolds and possibly draw inspiration from it in another context, it is important to describe the three instances that constitute the methodological framework of the action research: the Extended Collective, the Select Committee, and the Research Team. Borrowed from the “clinique du travail” (Clôt, 1999), this structure makes it possible to maintain a close collaboration between the practice environment and the researchers. Below, we present the composition of each of these committees, their respective mandates and the main achievements made in each instance.

- **The Extended Collective** brings together the school’s teaching staff (a dozen individuals) and members of the Research Team. In all, this group is composed of about twenty people. It meets once a year, just before the beginning of the school year, towards the end of August. Since the action research began in the spring of 2016, the Extended Collective has met twice so far (August 2016 and August 2017). The extended group’s mandate is to discuss the training needs for the coming year with the main actors, namely the school’s teachers, in the action research framework, i.e. teaching and the evaluation of reading and writing. It is during the Extended Collective’s first meeting that it was decided that the first year of activities of action research would be devoted to reading, and one of the ways suggested to promote it and stimulate students’ taste for reading was to organize a book fair at school.

- **The Select Committee** comprises five to seven people: the pedagogical advisor, two of the school’s teachers, the head of research, one or two other members of the Research Team, chosen according to the training needs expressed, and a research assistant. Within this committee, it is decided when and how to respond to the needs expressed in the Extended Collective, and that is where the means are deployed to achieve it. The Select Committee is also the group where the part of the research budget, reserved for the purchase of equipment and furniture for literature corners, is administered. It meets about once a month during the school year, and even more if needed. Meetings are held most of the time after the last class period, from 3:40 p.m. to approximately 4:45 p.m.

During the 2016–2017 school year, the Select Committee organized two training sessions on reading. The first, in October 2016, aimed to give teachers the choice of literary works for preschool and elementary school; the second, in April 2017, was to train teachers in animating and teaching of reading/appreciation again in preschool and elementary school. Note that this second training also targeted the parents of students in the community since a workshop was offered to them in the evening - to which a dozen parents participated. The book fair, organized by members of the Select Committee and a subgroup of school teachers, was held in the école Migwan gymnasium on April 28, 2017 (Blaser & Lépine, 2017). It was the driving force and culmination of the first year of the action research. During the 2017–2018 school year, training activities continued, focusing this time on reading assessment and writing. It should be noted that teachers from another local Indigenous school joined the teachers from école Migwan for the last courses, this after the school principal heard about the April 2017 Book Fair. This school should also be participating in the next book fair.

- **The Research Team** meets approximately every two months; it is the group that ensures the course of the action

research from a scientific point of view. The team is composed of seven members: five researchers, the pedagogical advisor and one Elder from the Pikogan community. The role of this team is to ensure that research data are collected regularly to document the action research process and to analyze the effects of training and other activities on the professional development of teachers, with a view to re-injecting some of these data into collective reflection. Thus, until now, two discussion circles and two series of interviews provide the main research data. In this context, the discussion circles offer a space for teachers to talk about the impact of action research in their classroom, both on their teaching and didactic practices, and also on students. In this project, the focus is on the professional development of teachers and that we are not trying to measure the direct effects of action research on students. During the discussion circles, however, teachers talk about what they observe in their classrooms. The Research Team, based on Guskey’s (2002) model, believes that by seeing changes in their students’ behaviour, teachers will be even more motivated to continue their efforts to improve or even change their teaching practices, which should enhance the positive effect on students. It should be noted that the discussion circles last about an hour, are held by videoconference and are recorded.

Semi-structured interviews, another data collection tool, were conducted with the teachers in March 2017 and June 2017, before and after the book fair. The first series of interviews aimed first at getting to know the teachers better professionally. How do they conceive evaluation, teaching and literacy development (reading and writing)? What is their relationship to writing? What writing teaching practices do they favour? What uses do they make of technology in their teaching?

The second series of interviews focused on the first impacts of the book fair, as observed by the teachers in the classrooms, as well as the effects of the two training sessions offered during 2016–2017.

**Some results**

While we are in the second year of action research activities, we can confirm that this project is bearing fruit. Data from the interviews and discussion circles, although still in process, already reveal that teachers reinvest in their classroom, to varying degrees, what they learn during the training. Above all, each classroom now has its own literature corner equipped with many books (it still needs to be equipped with stationery material useful for writing situations, to be done in the coming months). According to the teachers, the students really appreciate the spaces they use regularly. Located in the classroom or, in one case, near to and visible from the classroom, the literature corners are all different and nicely organized. It was the teachers who, considering the needs, age and tastes of their students, chose the furniture and accessories for their space.

The project has made it possible to renovate existing facilities or created new ones. In all cases, these areas provide a variety of seating and storage space for books (shelves, boxes, bookcases, display racks, etc.) purchased from local businesses or custom-made by a person from the community. Nothing complicated or sophisticated, but the invitation to read is clear, thanks to the variety of books, some of which were chosen by the students themselves during the first book fair (Blaser & Lépine, 2017). In this regard, it is interesting to report the teachers’ surprise at the selection of some students who chose books far beyond their level of reading skills, but who nevertheless read them. Finally, it should be noted that the renewal of the books in each classroom is ensured, during the year, by the teachers who still have an equipment budget and, above all, by the second book fair scheduled for October 2018. On this occasion, each student will again be able to choose two books, one for the classroom and the other for home. Although the action research ends in 2019, steps are underway to ensure the sustainability of the book fair beyond the grant period.

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**In Conclusion**

The action research presented in this article confirms the importance of bringing books as close as possible to students in order to develop the pleasure of reading - a pleasure so essential to the development of reading skills. It is also a fine example of collaboration between an Indigenous school community and the educational research community.

So what are the factors that contribute to the success of this project? First, the action research is based on the bonds of trust that have developed over the last six years between, on the one hand, the management and staff members of école Pikogan and, on the other hand, the researchers. It should be noted that in the first project, four people from the school participated in the action research, including the pedagogical advisor, which made it possible to establish a strong partnership and ensure continuity between the two projects. Then, this project was conceived from the beginning in consultation with the school and based on the needs expressed by the school environment. Feeling challenged, the teachers who did not participate in the first project all agreed to participate in the second action research, and they devote themselves to it with great constancy and interest. Finally, the complementarity within the Research Team - school environment, university environment; cultural origin; scientific expertise - also contributes to the success of this project.

REFERENCES


NOTES

1 “Supporting the Professional Development of Elementary School Teachers to Improve the Teaching and Assessment of Reading and Writing in an Indigenous context, in the Era of Information and Communication Technologies—ICT (free translation)

2 Also funded by the FRQSC, to which we are very grateful, the new team is composed of the following people: Christiane Blaser, Martin Lépine, Isabelle Nizet and Frédéric Saussez, Professors at Université de Sherbrooke; Yvonne da Silveira and Glorya Pellerin, Professors at Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue; Denis Simard, Professor at Université Laval; and Jan-Sébastien Dion, Research Professional.

3 Work clinic (free translation)

4 Some of the members of the Research Team attend the meeting via videoconference.

5 45,000 $ of the 175,000 $ allocated by the FRQSC for the action research.

6 The role of pedagogical advisor is particularly important since it is this person who, locally, motivates the group and orchestrates many tasks related to action research, such as organizing training sessions and meetings, planning data collection activities and more.