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## **Pretend Play and Emergent Literacy for Aboriginal Children**

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# **Pretend Play and Emergent Literacy for Aboriginal Children**

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## **Abstract**

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In educational contexts during early childhood, play has a central role. Pretend play, a leading activity for preschool children, supports several aspects of their overall development, including skills in emergent literacy. Aboriginal children also engage in pretend play to strengthen their oral language and literacy skills in their Aboriginal mother tongue or second language (in French or in English). This article examines the relationship between pretend play and emergent literacy, particularly with respect to Aboriginal children, and provides some strategies for early childhood educators and caregivers to infuse children's pretend play with emergent literacy activities and support.

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The central role of play in the education of young children is widely acknowledged. The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between pretend play and emergent literacy, with a particular emphasis on Aboriginal children, and to discuss some strategies for educators to combine these two approaches. Starting with a description of three early childhood programs that are available to Aboriginal children in Quebec, the article goes on to define pretend play and looks specifically at pretend play for Aboriginal children. The concept of emergent literacy is then reviewed, followed by a discussion of language choice in the development of Aboriginal children's emergent literacy. Links between pretend play and emergent literacy are explored, and finally, some strategies are suggested to encourage emergent literacy skill development in a literacy-enriched play environment.

### Play in Educational Contexts

Many researchers contend that play is the best means to enable children to explore and learn about the world around them. Much more than a source of entertainment and fun, play addresses multiple aspects related to children's overall development (Bouchard, Bigras, Charron, Duval, & Landry, 2014; Landry, 2014). Play promotes, in particular, the development of motor skills (Corrie & Barratt-Pugh, 1997), oral language (Andreson, 2005), children's ability to assert themselves, to resolve conflicts, and to interact with peers (Creasy, Jarvis, & Berk, 1998; Landry, 2014; Lindsey & Colwell, 2013; McElwain & Volling, 2005), literacy skills (Roskos & Christie, 2009), as well as imagination and the ability to take the perspective of others (Harris, 2007). For these reasons, play during early childhood is an educational intervention that promotes school readiness (Duval & Bouchard, 2013).

Despite the benefits of play, it is clear that in some formal educational settings which favor the academic learning of letters, numbers and colors, there is a lack of interest in play (Gmitrovà & Gmitrov, 2003; Miller & Almon, 2009; Trawick-Smith, 2012). In the opinion of many researchers, however, play provides an optimal context for learning for both the children attending a childcare service and those attending preschool classes (Bouchard et al., 2014; Larivée, Bédard, Larose, & Terrisse, 2014). Indeed, play can be viewed not as a pretext to learn, but as a learning context (Larivée et al., 2014; Larivée & Terrisse, 2010).

### Play in Early Childhood Programs in Quebec

In the province of Quebec, Canada, three childcare programs give priority to playing as a context for learning: (a) the educational childcare program of the ministère de la Famille et des Aînés (MFA), *Accueillir la petite enfance (Meeting Early Childhood Needs)*; (b) the preschool program of the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS), *Programme de formation de l'école québécoise (Quebec Education Program)*; and (c) the *Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve Program (AHSOR)* mandated by the federal department of Health Canada. What follows is a brief description of these programs, demonstrating how play is a foundation of each. These programs in particular have been selected because many Aboriginal communities in Quebec have chosen to use them in early childhood educational settings.

In Quebec, childcare services must utilize the *Accueillir la petite enfance* program which, according to the MFA (2007), aims to promote the overall development of children and gradually help them adapt to life in the community and harmoniously integrate into it (p. 5). In this program, play is, for the child, the best means to explore the world, to understand it, to

imagine it, and to modify and control it. As such, play is considered to be the main tool by which children express themselves, learn and develop (MFA, 2007, p. 20).

In childcare services, activities implemented by educators must help promote a comprehensive development of the child, including emotional dimensions, physical and motor skills, and social, moral, cognitive and language abilities. To achieve this, educators provide children with a favorable context for play, including adequate space, time to play, and various playing materials that meet their needs. Educators can also enter children's play to continue and complexify it, thus giving children the opportunity to further their learning. As such, learning through playing is one of the basic principles of the *Accueillir la petite enfance* program.

The *Programme de formation de l'école québécoise* (PFEQ), a preschool program, in contrast to education at the primary level, does not have government-mandated formal learning goals, but allows children to discover the joy of learning while exploring different ways to do it. In preschool, the child is at the heart of learning, and playing is considered to be an excellent way to learn. The PFEQ emphasizes that through play and spontaneous activity, children express themselves, experiment, construct knowledge, structure their thoughts, and develop their vision of the world (MEQ, 2001, p. 52).

As play occupies a prominent place in preschool education, teachers need to organize space and time accordingly. The PFEQ aims to promote six interrelated skills so that each child develops motor, emotional, social, language and cognitive aspects:

- Act effectively in different contexts related to the sensory and motor aspect.
- Assert his or her personality.
- Interact harmoniously with others.
- Communicate using his or her language resources.
- Build his or her understanding of the world.
- Carry out an activity or a project.

The guidelines of the preschool program also suggest that children should discover reading and writing and that play should be considered as a tool to achieving this. Teachers of Aboriginal children are encouraged to use and adapt the preschool education program based on the needs of their pupils and their culture (MEQ, 2004).

The mission of the third program, AHSOR, is to give children living in First Nations communities aged between birth and six years a positive learning experience focusing on traditions in a safe and culturally sensitive environment (Health Canada, 2011). To meet the needs of Aboriginal children, the program is divided into six sections: education, culture and language, health promotion, nutrition, social support, and parental/family involvement. The education component is designed to allow children to develop their self-esteem and leadership skills. As for the culture and language components, AHSOR encourages the acquisition of language and communication and promotes culturally relevant learning experiences. In each community, the program manager is responsible for implementing a curriculum that meets the needs of its children. AHSOR suggests possibilities for learning through play, encourages role-play, and provides activities that promote types of social and interactive play that encourage social skill development.

In short, these three programs used in early childhood educational settings in many Aboriginal communities in Quebec recognize the importance of play for the overall development of the child. In First Nations communities, children may attend these programs until age six, although once they reach age five, they usually begin attending kindergarten full time. Although

play can take many different forms depending on the age and cognitive and social development of the child (Miller & Almon, 2009), the next section will focus on pretend play, the leading activity of preschoolers (Bodovra & Leong, 2012; Vygotsky, 1967).

### **Pretend Play**

The work of Piaget and Vygotsky contributed to our understanding of the development of the child and, by extension, the role of play in children's growth (Göncü & Gaskins, 2011; Landry, Pagé, & Bouchard, 2014). Although there are some differences between the constructivist theory of Piaget and the cultural-historical theory of Vygotsky, they are similar in some respects. In particular, during pretend play, children manipulate symbols by decontextualizing daily experiences, thus building on their understanding of their own experiences (Göncü & Gaskins, 2011; Piaget, 1964; Vygotsky, 1967). Children who are engaged in make-believe play consciously and wilfully make a mental representation, different from the context of reality, which they incorporate into an imagined context (Lillard, 1993). In pretend play, children may transform the primary functions of objects, use imaginary objects, play a role, and create an imaginary situation (Bodovra & Leong, 2012; Lillard, 1994). To illustrate, a preschool-aged child may: pretend to be a firefighter; play with dolls and pretend to be a parent; play with figurines, make them speak, and create a story; and play with puppets, give them a role, use different voices, and create a play scenario.

Pretend play progresses from immature to mature play depending on the age and cognitive development of the child according to six elements: plan, roles, props (accessories), extended time frame, language, and scenario (Bodovra & Leong, 2012). In immature play, the child explores objects, does not change their basic function, uses limited language, is only beginning to adopt a role, and is not yet creating scenarios. In mature play, the child often spends more time planning his script than playing it out. He does not necessarily need accessories to play, but can now imagine them. The child's roles become complex and diverse and he can adopt several roles simultaneously. The language the child uses while engaged in play is rich and, at the same time, extends the play through planning, building, and evolving a scenario. In play-based educational settings, the adult supports the child in developing mature pretend play according to the child's development and age (Bodovra & Leong, 2008, 2009, 2012).

### **Pretend Play and Aboriginal Children**

Pretend play has been studied from a sociocultural perspective with children from different cultures by researchers in the fields of education and psychology (Göncü & Gaskins, 2007). This research has suggested that culture is reflected in pretend play, particularly in drawing, speaking, the choice of playing partners, variety and availability of toys, availability of outdoor play areas, and the themes of pretend play (Gaskins, Haight, & Lancy, 2007; Göncü, Mistry, & Mosier, 2000; Göncü, Özner, & Ahioglu, 2009; Haight & Miller, 1993).

In Canada, research has been conducted exploring the play of Aboriginal children aged from three to five years, both in the educational context and in the family home. Gillis (1991) studied Aboriginal children aged three to five at play in daycare centers in three communities in the province of Ontario. Gillis observed children engaged most frequently in motor play such as crawling, climbing, and riding a tricycle, whereas other forms of play, such as playing with musical instruments, were rarely observed. Children often engaged in pretend play when they were in a group. The theme of family was frequently observed, whereas community-related

themes, such as scenarios at shops or the doctor, were less frequent. The researcher asserted that the materials that educators provide to children, as well as the educators' participation in the pretend play, influence the themes of children's play. Gillis (1991) pointed out that Aboriginal culture encourages pretend play, noting similarities in traditional learning methods, including the use of symbols, legends, and imitation.

Jacob (2012) studied the involvement of Aboriginal mothers in the pretend play of their preschool-aged children in the home context. Four mothers and their children participated in the study. Data was collected through non-videotaped observations and interviews with the mothers. Jacob found that mothers frequently observed the pretend play of their children at home. Children played the roles they had the opportunity to see in their community. They pretended to be hunters, fathers, mothers, and snowmobile drivers. Mothers were also involved in the pretend play of their children, with different degrees of involvement, according to the importance they attached to this form of play for the development of their child. But the notion of pretend play remained unclear for some of them. The researcher observed a dichotomy between pretend play and learning, as some mothers focused on learning concepts from school during pretend play, interrupting the pretend play of their child to count or name letters or colors. Participating mothers provided play materials representing the immediate culture of the child, such as tool boxes, cars, forest animals, dolls, drums, and guns for hunting, suggesting observable play themes coming from the community. Lastly, the researcher concluded that the participation of Aboriginal mothers in the play of their child, and their interest in incorporating play materials that represent their culture, facilitated the transmission of culture to the next generation.

Both studies demonstrated that pretend play provides rich learning opportunities for Aboriginal children. It provides them with a deeper understanding of events and their culture. There is also a continuity between learning taking place at home and learning taking place in educational settings during early childhood. Pretend play allows children to develop language skills in the language of their Aboriginal mother tongue, which is a critical feature for the preservation of Aboriginal languages (Jacob, 2012; Jacob, Charron, & da Silveira, 2015). Pretend play is also an important tool for developing skills in literacy and numeracy among Aboriginal children (Jacob et al., 2015; Warren, Young, & DeVries, 2008). Moreover, it is an ideal way to reduce the gap between home literacy activities and those carried out at school (Hall, 2009).

### **Emergent Literacy**

Emergent literacy develops in the early childhood period (birth to six years) when children develop skills in speaking, listening, reading, and writing before entering a school or formal learning setting (Giasson, 2011). Through their involvement in the family and community environment, as well as through exposure to aspects of literacy, children develop reading and writing skills. Specifically, Giasson (2011) described emergent literacy as consisting of five components: (a) cognitive clarity which includes the functions of print, the technical language of reading and writing, rules of written language, and the relationship between oral and written language; (b) phonological awareness; (c) oral language; (d) knowledge of letters; and (e) the alphabetic principle, which is the child's understanding of the units of the spoken word and the corresponding graphical units. These components represent the beginning skills children need to develop before being able to read and write.

Home environmental print plays a major part in the development of children's emergent literacy skills in the years before they arrive in a kindergarten class (Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan,

2002; Griffin & Morrison, 1997; Wasik & Hendrickson, 2004), and can also be used to predict their reading skills in grade 3 (Sénéchal & Lefevre, 2002). Within a family, children have various opportunities to discover literacy. For instance, parents and older siblings can support children in the development of learning to read and write by participating in activities such as joint book reading, drawing, and pointing out letters and words on product packaging. Parents can also enhance writing at home by modeling reading and writing. When using writing to make a grocery list, for instance, adults can talk about the importance of writing so the child will be able to understand functions of writing and its usefulness.

Walter (1994) pointed out that environmental print in the home also affects the developing process of literacy skills of Aboriginal children. The researcher observed a group of Aboriginal preschool children participating in a Head Start program in the United States. Three levels of engagement in relation to literacy activities were observed: (a) 22% of children had a high degree of engagement in reading and writing, since they could read, tell, and remember stories; (b) 39% had a low level of engagement, as these children were only slightly involved in literacy activities; and (c) 39% of children had a moderate level of engagement in literacy activities. Walter concluded that culture alone could not explain these results since the children participating in the study all lived in the same Aboriginal community. Instead, this variance of engagement in literacy activities was explained by the differences in individual children's experiences with environmental print, text, reading, and writing in the home.

Ball (2007, 2010) noted that children living in some Aboriginal communities may find it more difficult to develop emergent literacy skills. This can be explained by several factors, one of which is the lack of teaching materials and books for children written in their Indigenous language (Ball, 2007, 2010; Jacob, 2012; Jacob et al., 2015). In this regard, Ball (2010) recommended literacy activities for Aboriginal children, especially for those with language delays. She noted, however, that there is no database on the language and speech development of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, or the prevalence, nature, or location of children with disorders in the acquisition and development of language and literacy (Ball, 2009, 2010).

### **Choice of Language for Promoting the Emergent Literacy of Aboriginal Children**

Many researchers contend that Aboriginal children who live in communities where the Indigenous language is spoken and written would benefit from oral and written activities in their Indigenous language to develop reading and writing skills (Francis & Reyhner, 2002). Indeed, expressing an Aboriginal language strictly in its oral communicative function would not be sufficient to support additive bilingualism, in which the Aboriginal language and a second language (e.g., French or English) are equally important (Hamers & Blanc, 2000; Jacob et al., 2015). Literacy function must also be valued and used by members of the community to promote children's full cognitive potential. However, Indigenous language writing activities are underused in some communities because access to books and educational materials written in Indigenous languages is limited (Francis & Reyhner, 2002; Jacob, 2012). Nonetheless, it is recommended that children, their families, and their educators engage in literacy activities in the Indigenous language when that language is learned as a mother tongue and especially when it can be written (Ball, 2010). This is the case, for example, for several Aboriginal languages in Quebec, such as Atikamekw, Cree, Mohawk and Inuktitut. If the Indigenous language is not written, Francis and Reyhner (2002) argued that children would still benefit from literacy activities in that language, and that it could be incorporated along with the second language (i.e., French or English) in pretend play.

Early childhood educators, childcare providers, parents, and families can utilize an array of activities to facilitate young children's emergent literacy development. Morning messages, music activities including nursery rhymes, songs, and chants, shared book reading and read alouds, are just a few such language activities (Bolduc, 2006; Charron, Boudreau, & Bouchard, 2010; Roskos, Christie, Widman, & Holding, 2010). Pretend play is also an ideal context for literacy learning. Embedding emergent literacy and numeracy opportunities in pretend play is an ideal strategy for supporting preschool children's learning (Bodovra & Leong, 2012).

### **Pretend Play: A Way to Support Emergent Literacy**

Over the past few decades, a sizable volume of research has been published on pretend play and literacy and several elements of pretend play have been shown to help promote emergent literacy. To begin, there is a link between pretend play and spoken language, one component of emergent literacy. This link is illustrated in two respects. The first is a semiotic function, as language and pretend play are both evocative manifestations of signifiers (Lewis, Boucher, Lupton, & Watson, 2000; McCune, 1995; Piaget, 1964; Veneziano, 2002, 2007, 2010). Language contributes to pretend play as children use it to create play scenarios. Children use language to complexify and organize their play scenarios (Veneziano, 2002, 2007, 2010). Indeed, oral language is an important factor contributing to the development of pretend play (Jacob, 2012; Musatti et al., 1998; Stanley & Konstanterreas, 2007). It provides the means to organize the play, to distinguish the moments when participants leave the play to negotiate roles and to create scenarios (Musatti, Veneziano, & Mayers, 1998; Veneziano, 2007). A second relationship between pretend play and language is the theory of mind (Veneziano, 2002, 2007, 2010). The theory of mind is defined as the ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others, and it is through language skills that the child is able to do so (de Villiers, 2005; Slaughter & Repacholi, 2003). During pretend play, the child synchronizes different desires, his own and those of his partners, appropriates to himself the world of representation, transforms the primary function of objects, and learns to negotiate his feelings in different situations, all of which advance the theory of mind (Lillard, 1994, 1998).

A second element of pretend play that has been shown to help promote emergent literacy is symbolic transformation. The symbolic transformations performed in pretend play have been shown to contribute to the learning of writing (Hall, 2009; Pellegrini, 1984; Pellegrini & Galda, 1982; Roskos & Neuman, 1998). The child playing who transforms objects develops his mental representations. For example, while playing, a child may use a large cardboard box as a car or may use a building block as a cell phone. Representation is a concept that he will need when he begins to represent sounds, words, and ideas using the symbols of writing and drawings (Kirkham, Stewart, & Kidd, 2013; Roskos & Neuman, 1998; Vygotsky, 1967).

Metaplay is a third element of pretend play that has been studied in connection with the development of skills in reading and writing (Christie, 1991; Fein, 1981; Hall, 2009; Williamson & Silvern, 1992). Metaplay occurs when a child becomes aware that he is acting as a player and voluntarily leaves his or her role in thinking or communicating about the play, acting his role, or pretending (Trawick-Smith, 1998). The term *metacommunication* is used to describe the form of speech occurring in metaplay (Andresen, 2005; Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012). An example of metacommunication would be if a child momentarily paused the pretend play to tell another player, "We need a train driver to drive the animals in the forest. Will you be the driver?" In this example, the child is not only trying to describe elements of his play, but is also adding elements to the story. He is aware of some language differences, for example, the difference



between reality and fiction, and ensures that the story “happens” by coordinating his actions and language with that of the other player. This endeavour allows him to develop general literacy skills as well as story understanding skills (Fein, 1981; Hall, 2009; Sawyer & DeZutter, 2009; Williamson & Silvern, 1992).

A fourth element of pretend play which contributes to emergent literacy development is narrative competence (Kavanaugh & Engel, 1998; Kim, 1999; Sawyer & DeZutter, 2009). Pretend play scenarios are rich in vocabulary and can entail narration. Narration has certain characteristics, like being an oral or written story with varying content depending on the themes. It may describe a direct situation, include characters or actors and various views expressed by the players or the narrator himself, and may differ from reality (Kavanaugh & Engel, 1998). The narrative type of language skills used in pretend play allow the child to be immersed in a form of language which is similar to the written language found in books (de Hann, 2005; Hall, 2009).

### **Literacy-Enriched Play Environments in Aboriginal Educational Contexts**

By utilizing pretend play, early childhood educators can enhance children’s development of both mature pretend play and emergent literacy (Bodovra & Leong, 2012; Landry et al., 2014; Saracho, 2002). Additionally, several studies have indicated that literacy-enriched play environments enhance children’s emergent literacy skills (Morrow, 1990; Roskos et al., 2010; Roskos & Neuman, 1993; Vukelich, 1994). Literacy-enriched play environments are environments where adults and children alike have many opportunities to write, where children are provided with ample materials for drawing and writing, and where children have access to books, magazines, posters, and other printed materials. Literacy-enriched play environments enable children to recognize and read words more easily and more frequently become involved in activities in which they pretend to read and write, scribble, draw, and write letters and words. When play themes require roles in which children have to read and write (e.g., secretary, veterinarian, doctor), they adopt the behaviours of readers and writers. In addition, when an adult is involved in the play, also adopting a reader’s and writer’s role, children’s emergent literacy skills can be enhanced even further (Saracho, 2002).

In Aboriginal communities, providing a literacy-enriched play environment and engaging in children’s play while modeling reading and writing can be carried out by AHSOR childcare staff, preschool teachers, and other early childhood caregivers. Based on the work of Bodrova and Leong (2012), Jacob et al. (2015) suggested some strategies for Aboriginal communities to encourage emergent literacy in pretend play by:

- Organizing a literacy-enriched play environment in the early care environment or classroom with materials to address topics that interest the children.
- Providing children with at least 30 to 45 minutes daily of play time in a literacy-enriched play environment.
- Proposing rich and varied topics for children that can be linked to Aboriginal culture (e.g., fishing, hunting, pow-wow).
- Proposing themes and roles to children that they have the opportunity to see in their community (e.g., firefighter, nurse, or mechanic).
- Writing words in the children’s Aboriginal language in relation to the play themes and placing the words in the literacy-enriched play environment.
- Providing children with materials to write.
- Being a playmate for children and modeling exemplary reading and writing.

By using these few strategies, educators and caregivers can foster mature pretend play while encouraging reading, writing, listening, and speaking in a playful learning environment. For example, an area arranged for pretend hunting can inspire children to take different roles: the hunters, the guide, members of family, the butcher, etc. To promote social interaction and to allow children to develop these roles, several children should be given the opportunity to play at the same time in this area. Notebooks and pencils can be added, which children may use to write the names of the animals that they see, to draw a map, or to make their own signs. Cash registers and money could be added to pay the butcher. Words written in the children's Aboriginal language, such as camp, forest, trap, and the names of animals, can be placed in the literacy-enriched play environment. Adults, who play the role of facilitators, can show the word *camp* on a cue card to the children and ask them to indicate a corner or other place where they would like to place the card and pretend play that activity. Educators can also model the spelling of the word, and provide a place for children to write their own words. They can encourage children to write other words and messages related to the pretend play, such as directions to the hare traps. This way, teachers can introduce multiple activities for reading and writing while playing make-believe with the children.

### Conclusion

Pretend play and emergent literacy are two interrelated approaches meriting further consideration in the early education of Aboriginal children. Social pressure on preschool teachers and other educators in Quebec that leads to formal teaching (Larivée et al., 2014) and lack of time and training help explain why the combination of these approaches is currently underexploited (Boudreau & Charron, 2014). Caregivers and early childhood educators of Aboriginal children are encouraged to recognize the importance of pretend play for the overall development of the child, and also to integrate literacy opportunities into children's pretend play. Caregivers and early childhood educators of Aboriginal children play an important role in encouraging emergent literacy; how they communicate with children, choosing to use children's Aboriginal language in play, and their actions and practices are all bearers of meaning that contribute to children's emergent literacy development. Future research is needed to better document this "Aboriginal knowledge," and the way that Aboriginal early childhood educators and caregivers support emergent literacy through symbolic play (Jacob et al., 2015).

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