

# Storytelling as a Foundation to Literacy Development for Aboriginal Children: Culturally and Developmentally Appropriate Practices

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There is substantial evidence that Aboriginal youth face serious challenges in schooling, in general, and in literacy development, specifically. Thus, it is essential to design early literacy programmes that engage Aboriginal children and produce positive outcomes. In this article, the authors propose that such programmes include oral storytelling by teachers and students because it is a precursor to reading and writing across cultures and a traditional Aboriginal teaching tool. Moreover, storytelling fits with Aboriginal epistemology—the nature of their knowledge, its foundations, scope, and validity. The authors begin by reviewing a representative sample of the research that has examined the outcomes of early literacy instruction with Aboriginal children. Next, the authors describe Aboriginal epistemology, highlighting the role of the oral tradition. Finally, the authors describe an ongoing study aimed at supporting early literacy development through a developmentally and culturally appropriate oral storytelling instruction programme.

*Keywords:* Aboriginal literacy, culturally insensitive instruction, storytelling

Chief Barry Ahenakew quoted the wisdom of the Elders when he stated, “Education is our buffalo. It is our new means of survival” (Christensen, 2000, p. xi). Unfortunately, the current state of affairs amongst Aboriginal people does not reflect this compelling and insightful utterance. According to the 2001 Canadian census, only 41% of members of status Indian bands completed high school compared to 69% for all adult Canadians. The percentage of First Nations people with less than a grade-nine education is double that of other Canadians. Many reasons for these levels of performance have been identified, including poverty, health issues, language challenges, cultural factors, and limited literacy education (First Nations Education Steering Committee and First Nations Schools Association, 2001; George, 1998; National Aboriginal Design Committee, 2002).

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In this article, we make a case for the importance of oral narrative in Aboriginal children’s (i.e., First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) literacy instruction. In particular, we argue that oral narrative or storytelling fits with Aboriginal epistemology—the nature of their knowledge, its foundations, scope, and validity. Moreover, storytelling is a traditional Aboriginal teaching tool and, as such, is familiar and culturally relevant to the children. We begin by reviewing a representative sample of the research that has examined the outcomes of early literacy instruction with Aboriginal children, documenting successes and challenges. Next, we describe Aboriginal epistemology, highlighting the role of the oral tradition. Because of the paucity of empirical peer reviewed studies conducted within Aboriginal contexts, we next turn to research conducted in non-Aboriginal contexts, arguing for its relevance on the bases of narrative’s universality as a meaning-making tool. Finally, we link this latter corpus into Aboriginal narrative thought by describing a current, ongoing study aimed at supporting early literacy development through a developmentally and culturally appropriate oral storytelling instruction programme.

## Literacy Development in Aboriginal Contexts

### *Early Literacy Learning*

The challenges Aboriginal children face in their early literacy learning cannot be viewed as residing within the child. When seeking the barriers to literacy learning, we must look beyond language development, background knowledge, and phonemic awareness. These competencies are, of course, central to literacy development, but for Aboriginal children, as for many children living in poverty, they are only part of the puzzle. Critical to supporting literacy is understanding that Aboriginal learners face challenges due to the intergenerational effects of residential

schools and schools' historic failure to acknowledge and reflect Aboriginal identity (Ing, 2002).

Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal literacy educators have consistently called for information on effective resources and methods that are culture-based and hence, address the social and spiritual realities of Aboriginal learners (National Aboriginal Design Committee, 2002). According to George (1998), creating these resources involves using both language and culture to support communities as they solidify and expand their positive cultural identity. The work of the Canadian Council on Learning (2007; Battiste, 2005) identifying indicators of successful Aboriginal learning echoes the call for culturally based literacy resources. This group has argued for a focus on early development and learning, Aboriginal languages and cultures, school-based learning, and community-based education. Similarly, McCarty and Schaffer (1992) proposed that members of the community can profitably become involved in Aboriginal language education by serving as storytellers and sharing their knowledge of the people, places, and things that are an integral part of the communities' life. This type of community engagement not only offers children a model of how stories should be structured and told; it also signals to them that, within their very communities, there are stories to tell.

Unfortunately, there is a paucity of peer-reviewed research that has investigated how the indicators described above might shape literacy instruction and what direct effects they have on literacy levels. In general, studies simply identify and argue for the inclusion of elements that are involved in culturally appropriate programming, based on stakeholder interview data. Nevertheless, there is widespread agreement that children's experience and specific cultural practises should be reflected in all instruction programmes, including literacy programmes. To illustrate, Suina and Smolkin (1994) asked six Caucasian teachers, who taught Pueblo children, to describe their efforts to make literacy instruction culturally appropriate. These teachers saw creating a culturally appropriate programme as essential and reported weaving students' experiences from their environment and culture into the curriculum. They also reported providing opportunities to work collaboratively and incorporating the children's native language. No independent observations of instructional practises were undertaken, however, and no outcomes evaluations were included. Nevertheless, Suina and Smolkin concluded that teachers must be ethnosensitive and that culturally appropriate curricula should incorporate practises of the tribe.

Bell et al. (2004) used a case study approach to examine 10 examples of Aboriginal schooling in successful band-operated schools in Canada. Successful schools were identified by provincial Ministries of Education, School Districts, and First Nations Education Departments and Organisations. Although selection criteria included quantitative data, the source of these data was not specified. Amongst the numerous strengths highlighted was success in literacy learning. Successful programmes shared numerous elements. First, the literacy instruction methods used in four of the 10 schools involved (a) ability grouping with leveled reading materials, (b) small group instruction, (c) block scheduling either across the primary grades or all grades school/primary wide, and (d) the use of commercial reading programmes (e.g., SRA, Mastery Reading, Accelerated Reading Recovery, and Nelson Benchmarks). Second, at all schools, instruction focussed on interventions for at risk students (e.g., Headstart, preschool, all day

kindergarten, phonemic awareness instruction) and an effort was made to involve families. Third, all schools focussed on aboriginal language and culture. Instruction in both Aboriginal languages and English was the constant across all schools but challenges in finding Aboriginal materials and instructors were reported. Furthermore, although the centrality of culture was acknowledged, the shape it took varied across schools. In some communities, parents wished to be the cultural teachers, with the school assuming a limited role. In other communities, issues arose around the teaching of traditional versus Christian beliefs.

Based on their analysis of these schools, Bell et al. (2004) recommended that (a) models of language, Aboriginal or English, be provided to children in the home environment, (b) Aboriginal language immersion programmes be developed and empirical research conducted on them, and (c) language and literacy instruction be provided by trained Aboriginal teachers and curriculum materials be culturally appropriate. This emphasis on Aboriginal languages in educational programmes is supported by Leavitt's (1995) argument that language leads to fundamental differences in how the world is viewed, how knowledge is conceptualized and categorized, and how one relates and interacts with others. To illustrate, many Indigenous languages are verb- rather than noun-based in contrast to English (e.g., the Maliseet word/verb for moon is *nipawset*, or "walks at night"). Such a fundamental difference in linguistic structure might well create challenges for some First Nations children who do not have a firm grounding in either their native language or English. Despite the importance of the language-linked aims articulated by Bell et al. (2004), 2001 Canadian census data indicate that only 21% of Aboriginal people speak an Aboriginal language as their native tongue—a decline from 26% in 1996. Furthermore, only 16% of Aboriginal children under 14 can speak an Aboriginal language.

Yet focussing on community involvement to increase literacy levels, separate from language-related issues, offers promise, as demonstrated by the work of Timmons and colleagues. A successful 10-week family literacy programme was designed in consultation and collaboration with Mi'kmaq families in Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia (Timmons et al., 2006). In the design process, community members identified their cultural and literacy needs and these were carefully considered in the programme development. To illustrate, Module 3 focussed on the importance of transmitting cultural oral histories and coupled this with knowledge of how to tell a story to children and help them remember it. An outcome evaluation determined that the literacy levels of students who participated in the programme with their families were significantly higher than students in the delayed treatment group (i.e., students who received treatment after the initial programme was completed). Specifically, scores in word recognition, and reading and listening comprehension all improved from preprogramme levels. In follow up interviews, participating families voiced a high degree of satisfaction with the programme. The success represented in this community-based family literacy programme begs the question: What cultural elements impact Aboriginal children's learning? To address this question, we now turn to a discussion of Aboriginal ways of knowing and understanding the world.

### *Aboriginal Ways of Knowing and Education*

Aboriginal traditional knowledge and traditional ways of knowing are based on a natural order of life. Aboriginal knowledge is typically represented as circles within circles to reflect the interconnectedness of all living things as they pass through the cycles of their lives. Thus, as Cajete, a Pueblo scholar, noted, Aboriginal knowing acknowledges the mutual reciprocity between human beings and all things, tangible and intangible (Cajete, 1994). For Aboriginal peoples, then, education is a process of becoming aware of the entwined interconnected relationships of all life and one's role in creation.

Central to aboriginal ways of knowing is a belief in the existence of a spiritual realm. All things in the world, be they animate or inanimate, possess spirit. An Aboriginal understanding of the nature of knowledge includes a recognition and knowledge of the spirit of things and how each connects to form a whole. Traditional tribal knowledge is holistic and consistently considers the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical elements (Doige, 2003). It reflects a unique way of seeing, feeling, listening, acting, and learning and centers on relationships "between self, community, nation, and creation with a focus on words, language, listening, and comprehension (Doige, 2003, p. 9). This view is echoed in the words of Cajete (2000, p. 184), "Ultimately, the purpose of education is to instruct the next generation about what is valued and important to society." This perspective demands that teachers become aware of the worldview and culture of which the child is a part.

Historically and today, First Nations people share important knowledge, culture and traditional lessons through the telling of stories. It is through the telling of stories and legends that First Nations people preserve what is most important to them—language, traditions, culture, and identity. Stories are used to provide a sociocultural and historical account of the community knowledge from elders to youth, ensuring its survival with new generations (Fixico, 2003). Thus, stories play a critical role for Aboriginal students in learning to read and write and traditional oral forms of knowledge transmission can and should be used to support literacy development (Ottmann, Abel, Flynn, & Bird, 2007). Furthermore, Francis and Reyhner (2002) argued that having acquired an understanding of story structure and a proficiency in creating and sharing stories and legends, children are well positioned to use them in school in literacy-related language tasks. Additionally, these researchers posited that coupling the practises of oral storytelling with their written form supports literacy development because, "when discourse patterns that correspond to the children's experience with [I]ndigenous oral forms are recognised and incorporated into the school-based literacy programme, discontinuities between community and classroom begin to break down" (Francis & Reyhner, 2002, p. 52). When oral stories are written by children, and they begin to think deliberately about the story's structure, verbal expression is transformed into composing a text. Thus, the strong oral tradition of Aboriginal peoples provides the opportunity to ground literacy development in oral stories that reflect the children's family, community relationships, and culture (Zepeda, 1995). Yet, although there are some universal beliefs, practises, values, and traditions that cross and bind Aboriginal peoples, educators and researchers must recognise that geography, history, and language played a significant role in creating unique tribal cultures (Mark, 2007).

Although there has been little empirical research conducted on the development of Aboriginal children's narrative and its cultural roots, there is much research on the narrative capabilities of children, in general, and its influence on literacy development, in particular. Because narrative, as a tool for learning and meaning making is not unique to Aboriginal cultures, we now turn to a discussion of that large corpus of research.

### Narrative Across Cultures

#### *The Nature of Narrative*

According to Feldman, Bruner, Kalmar, and Renderer (1993), "...the mastery of narrative models must be one of the central tasks of cognitive development in any culture" (p. 340). Narrative is seen as one of the two main modes of human thought, the other being paradigmatic thought (Bruner, 1990). Whereas the paradigmatic mode organises the world into categories and concepts, explains natural phenomena, and seeks objective truth based on evidence and proof, the narrative mode makes sense of the social world by interpreting human actions and intentions, organises everyday experience, and seeks plausibility and internal consistency that is lifelike. Bruner also argued that narratives have two landscapes: The landscape of action pertains to states, actions, and events that occur in the physical world, and the landscape of consciousness involves an interpretation of these states, actions, and events that are experienced by the characters (Bruner, 1986). This dual landscape of narrative provides a framework for linking action and consequence, which enables us to interpret the intentions of others (Bruner, 1986; Fivush & Haden, 2003). Through narrative we develop a deeper understanding of the social world—of how others think, why they behave the way they do, and the implications people's actions hold for others. The stories we share of our life's experiences are shaped, in terms of content and organisation, by the stories others tell to us within our culture. When we share stories of our life with others, we cast ourselves as both narrator and protagonist and we entertain a range of plots, characters and stories to explain why people do what they do (Bruner, 1991). Narratives allow us to organise and represent our experiences by providing an account of events over time, express them in a sequential and diachronic order; understand behaviour that is sometimes contrary to some culturally defined norm and the human plight that results; and, provide a way to reflect, examine, and interpret the underlying intentions behind action (Bruner, 1991). Thus, by representing events, narratives necessitate reflection and analysis, requiring us to interpret and make meaning of experience (Nelson, 2003). As such, narrative is a powerful tool for socialization (Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997) and an effective way to transmit cultural knowledge, values, and beliefs (Campbell, 1988).

#### *How Narrative Develops*

Considerable research has been conducted on how narrative knowing is passed on to children and how it develops. A child's first stories are personal narratives in which familiar experiences such as birthday parties and special trips are recounted (Peterson & McCabe, 2004). Parent-child conversations that help to interpret, reminisce, and recount experiences are central to the development

of a child's beginning personal narratives (Haden, 2003; Peterson & McCabe, 2004). The study of these conversations is embedded in Vygotskian (Vygotsky, 1978) notions that emphasise the centrality of the relationship between adult and child in learning. The adult structures a task for a child that is slightly beyond the child's capabilities. Over time, with guidance and feedback, this external process is internalised by the child and becomes part of his or her inner thought.

Language, then, is a cultural tool that mediates children's growing capacity to give an overt account of their experiences. Change in understanding discourse (e.g., think, know, understand, and remember), elaborates children's understanding of how the world works, allowing them to mark ongoing experience and to look back, analyse, and reconstruct events (Nelson, 1996). Language allows the parent to introduce the child to culture, the embodiment of values, beliefs, customs and practises that structures, interprets, and organises experience. Parent-child dialogue reflects the cultural values and beliefs that guide and interpret human behaviour. Thus, language ties group members together within and across generations by conveying values, beliefs, customs, and practises of the culture (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003; Miller, 2003; Nelson, 2003). In this sense, culture can be viewed as a socially interactive process that includes shared activity and shared meaning (Greenfield et al., 2003). Behavioural scripts, values, beliefs, rules, goals, expectations, symbolisms, and social institutions become the vehicles of enculturation, influencing the content and structure of our internal representations (Nelson, 1996). In effect, culture defines what a good story is and how it should be told (Bruner, 1991; Gutierrez-Clellen & Quinn, 1993). Thus, language structures and organises experiences and culture influences how and why we interact and communicate.

Developing narrative capacities draw on something beyond culture and language, however. The child also brings memories of people, places, and events. Initially, children recall single events that have particular significance in their life (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2006) and eventually develop the capacity to make causal connexions between events in their life unrelated in immediate time (Bruner, 1986). Memories are no longer simply referenced according to markers in time, but also to the emotions, motivations, goals, and attempts captured in memory (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Eventually, themes of experience are created, serving an interpretive lens to life and self-understanding (Habermas, & Bluck, 2000). Thus, memories define who we were and who we are, and give us a sense of purpose, unity, and identity (McLean & Thorne, 2003).

Memories, language, and culture come together in the creation of a personal narrative. Language gives one the ability to name things that are not in the immediate environment and to slow and stabilise experience so that they are shared in a temporal transitive fashion (Nelson, 1996). It allows us to represent and express time, perspective, mental states, emotions, plans and problems. Language further develops children's ability to organise and structure experience, serving as a tool to articulate past experiences and interact in socially meaningful ways (Bohanek, Fivush, & Duke, 2006). The nature of these social interactions between parent and child influences the mental representations of experience children develop (Miller & Mangelsdorf, 2005), shapes how children evaluate themselves based within those experiences (Bohanek et al., 2006), and influences how they understand they are to be within

their culture (Fivush & Nelson, 2004). To illustrate, the mental representations formed by cultures that favour an individualistic pathway of development emphasise the self as an active constructor of the future, whereas cultures that favour interdependent pathways of development will give a stronger emphasis on the self as an integrated part of a community (De Marrais, Nelson, & Baker, 1992). Thus, narrative discourse allows children to reflect on and make sense of a culturally appropriate self (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). By creating a shared past through narrative, there is a shared perspective on how to evaluate and interpret experiences, which leads to a shared moral perspective. In this regard, an understanding of self through time influences the way in which the past is constructed, and the way in which the past is constructed influences the way in which self is conceptualized, in an ongoing dialectical relation (Fivush & Nelson, 2004).

### *Narrative and Literacy Development*

Narrative is not only a vehicle for understanding the self within the culture, however. It has been thought for some time that the development of narrative schema and oral narrative ability are pathways for literacy development (Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002). Oral narrative is similar to written narrative as both require concise syntactical structure and the use of topical and abstract vocabulary (Roth et al., 2002). The production of an oral narrative also demands that a child become adept in the use of extended language units (Roth, Speece, Cooper & De La Paz, 1996). Research has shown that early oral narrative competency is a major predictor of literacy acquisition later in the school years (Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001). To elaborate, narrative skill is related to the development of decontextualized speech, which has been identified as a major precursor to literacy development (Tabors et al., 2001). Decontextualized speech is the ability to speak about events in the past and involves a refinement of simply recounting simple personal narratives by including explicit vocabulary, clarity in pronoun usage, and precision in the use of temporal connectives such as "then" and "so" (Stadler & Cuming Ward, 2005; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 851). Moreover, decontextualized speech is essential to understanding the decontextualized text children experience when learning to read. The comprehension of decontextualized oral language is thus a precursor to reading comprehension. More specifically, with the development of decontextualized oral language comes knowledge of vocabulary, sentence structure, and techniques for establishing cohesion and coherence (e.g., *next, finally, meanwhile*).

### **Toward an Empirically Validated, Developmentally Based, and Culturally Appropriate Storytelling Programme**

Given the demonstrated link between oral narrative and culture—both Aboriginal and main stream—and literacy development, we have adapted an empirically validated, developmentally based storytelling programme (McKeough et al., 1995) so that it reflects cultural realities of the Nakoda people. We chose to focus our instruction on oral storytelling not only because it is an Aboriginal cultural tool but also because of the decreased cognitive demands it places on young literacy learners, relative to

written text (Hidi & Hildyard, 1980). We posit, therefore, that working with oral stories supports early literacy development in that it is a precursor to working with written texts. In what follows, a brief description of the programme is offered, followed by an account of the process involved in adapting it. In describing this ongoing programme, we wish to highlight how a developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive instructional programme can effectively support literacy development in an aboriginal community when it is shaped by and integrated with aboriginal culture.

### *The Original Story Thinking Programme*

The instruction programme focussed on story plot (i.e., structure and social-psychological content) and coherence. Two theoretical frameworks were integrated in the instruction activities: Following Vygotskian theory (Vygotsky, 1978), we designed the instructional sequence to recapitulate the culturally specific typical sequence of narrative development; Following neo-Piagetian developmental theory, instruction focussed on building a series of conceptual bridges from one level of development to the next in the empirically identified sequence (McKeough, 1992, ; McKeough & Sanderson, 1996). Specifically, cognitive scaffolding (Rogoff, 1990) supported the creation of stories that contained multiple breaches (by focussing on problem and complicating events or subproblems) and included characters' intentions (i.e., by helping children understand the relationship between characters' actions and mental states; Bruner, 1990). This scaffolding is accomplished, in part, by providing conceptual mnemonics in the form of icons that represented story characters' mental states (e.g., happy, sad, and scared were represented as line drawings of facial expressions; thinking was represented as a thought cloud and having an idea was represented as a light bulb). Moreover, as cognitive scaffolds, these graphic depictions circumvented children's processing capacity limitations and thus, supported the construction of a more advanced story concept.

Instructional efforts are also directed toward helping children create cohesive stories through the use of conjunctive words that signify additive, temporal, causal, and adversative relations between story events. Conjunctives were used first in a social context (i.e., oral group storytelling), with varying degrees of cognitive scaffolding, depending on the individual child's zone of proximal development. Following Vygotsky (1962), we argue that conjunctives eventually transform into inner speech, resulting in conceptual growth in children's understanding of, for example, causal and adversative relations. Because the use of causal and adversative conjunctives occurs later than additive and temporal forms (Fox, 1993; Halliday & Hasan, 1976), *and* and *then* were introduced first, followed by *because*, *so*, and *but*. The adversive, *but*, was included to link breeches and canonical states.

Instruction in the two targeted narrative components is multimodal (Gambrell & Jawitz, 1993; Shafir, 1999). Pictures and graphic mnemonics represent stories spatially, whereas oral discussion and text represent them verbally. Similarly, children are asked to produce stories in pictorial, oral, and written form. More specifically, graphic supports include story frames (as in comic strips), icons (e.g., happy face and light bulb), story starter picture cards, and picture storybooks. Verbal activities include oral and written exchanges (e.g., individual storytelling and story writing, joint storytelling and story writing, story retelling), choosing ap-

propriate *superglue* words (i.e., conjunctives), and labelling and discussing the components of plot structure (e.g., problem, failed attempt, resolution), story elements (e.g., setting, characters, plot), and story landscapes [for example, what characters did (i.e., their actions) versus what they wanted, thought, and felt (i.e., their mental states)]. Individual and small group activities provide children with opportunities to compose oral stories to accompany their line drawings and mental state icons and then to incorporate written text. Such an integration of graphic, oral, and written modalities has been shown, in previous research, to maximise learning (Shafir, 1999).

### *Adaptation of the Story Thinking Programme for a Nakota Context*

The stories included as models in the Story Thinking programme (McKeough et al., 1995) were either taken from children's trade books or written specifically for the programme. In both cases, the stories largely reflected the mainstream culture. To improve the programme's cultural relevance, we worked with a First Nations advisory group to identify content themes and instructional material in order to make the programme. The advisory group, composed of First Nations representatives (i.e., three Elders and a school cultural coordinator) and representatives from the school district (i.e., literacy coordinator, classroom teachers, and school principals), discussed and made recommendations concerning the literacy learning needs of the children, the thematic content of the programme, and instruction materials. Using the advisory group recommendations as a guide, members of the research team, which included two academic First Nations representatives, reviewed legends of the Stoney/Nakota people and aboriginal-focussed narrative trade books and identified those that were developmentally appropriate for the early school years and potentially culturally relevant for First Nations children. The trade books we selected included legends and stories of contemporary Aboriginal life that were written and illustrated by First Nations people. For children aged four to eight years, many notable books depicting First Nations/Aboriginal life in the modern world have been published. To illustrate, *The Song Within My Heart*, written by David Bouchard (2002) and illustrated by Allan Sapp, tells the story of a young boy preparing for his first powwow. *SkySisters*, written by Waboose (2000), explored important themes such as tradition and sisterhood. The legend trade book collection was equally rich. For example, stories of Wesakejack from the Cree culture (Balantyne, 1994) and Nanabosho from the Ojibwe culture (McLellan & McLellan, 1995) tell of teachings given to the people. Two of the researchers, one of whom is First Nations, worked with the collection of trade books and the original Story Thinking programme to develop sample lessons, including text and line drawings. These were vetted with members of the Advisory Committee, to ensure their relevance to the Stoney people. Following this consultation, revisions were made to the lessons and an instruction manual was created. All instruction materials, including trade books and constructed stories, will remain in the school and will be the property of the First Nations band. Ongoing collaboration throughout the study was considered essential by both the Advisory Committee and researchers.

We are close to completing our instructional work with the children. Preliminary results from end-of-unit assessments and

microgenetic analysis indicate that children are showing considerable progress in oral storytelling. We will next examine how this progress relates to their developing reading and language skills using standardised assessment measures. The ultimate intent of our research is to use our findings to influence practice and policy within early literacy classrooms devoted to Aboriginal students. With information gained from the research, we anticipate providing teachers with effective, culturally relevant classroom literacy strategies, and policymakers with information that supports First Nations student learning. To achieve this goal, with the help of an Aboriginal Advisory Committee, the research team will engage in dialogue with policymakers at various levels (i.e., tribal councils, district personnel, Alberta Education). This dialogue will help policymakers understand the complex issues that affect language and literacy in First Nations children and aid in translating intervention findings into changes in practice and policy. If policymakers thoroughly understand issues related to literacy acquisition in Aboriginal children, we believe that a sustainable model for instruction, along with relevant, essential support and resources, will be secured through policy.

## Résumé

De nombreuses données indiquent que les jeunes Autochtones font face à de nombreux défis à l'école, notamment en matière de développement de la littéracie. Par conséquent, il faut élaborer des programmes de littéracie en bas âge qui leur sont adaptés et qui donnent des résultats positifs. Dans cet article, nous proposons que ces programmes comprennent un volet oral, dans le cadre duquel enseignants et élèves racontent des histoires aux enfants. En effet, le récit oral, qui est en précurseur à la lecture et à l'écriture dans toutes les cultures, est un outil d'enseignement traditionnel des Autochtones. De plus, le récit oral est bien adapté à l'épistémologie autochtone-la nature, l'origine, la portée et la valeur de leur savoir. Nous commençons par analyser un échantillon représentatif de la recherche sur les résultats de l'enseignement des connaissances nécessaires à la lecture et à l'écriture aux enfants autochtones en bas âge. Puis nous décrivons l'épistémologie autochtone en soulignant le rôle de la tradition orale. Enfin, nous décrivons une étude en cours dont le but est de soutenir le développement de la littéracie en bas âge au moyen d'un programme d'enseignement axé sur le récit oral, et qui est approprié sur les plans développemental et culturel.

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