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# Dramatic Play in Northern Aboriginal Head Start Classrooms: Supporting Indigenous Children's Learning of their Culture and Language

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## Abstract

Three Aboriginal Head Start educators and a university professor report on a collaborative inquiry that examined video recordings of children's dramatic play with Indigenous cultural materials to learn how children interacted with materials and see the role of the Ojibway language in their play. In their play, children imitated Indigenous cultural practices carried out in the home, at sacred ceremonies, and on the land. The children showed an understanding of Ojibway words but did not speak them in their dramatic play. We propose suggestions for non-Indigenous educators who wish to introduce children to Indigenous cultural practices and languages or to incorporate the cultural practices of children's families into classroom dramatic play.

## Key Words

Aboriginal Head Start (AHS), Indigenous cultural practices, teaching Ojibway language and culture, play-based learning, pedagogical documentation

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## **Dramatic Play in Northern Aboriginal Head Start Classrooms: Supporting Indigenous Children's Learning of their Culture and Language**

**Eugema, Kayla and Tina:** It was a mild winter morning. During outdoor time, the children in our northern Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) program asked about snow in the trees. We educators saw this as an opportunity to take the children for a walk into the bush area in the backyard of our AHS to explore nature and teach them about different trees, especially the cedar trees because cedar has great significance as a sacred medicine in our Indigenous culture. During the nature walk we picked cedar branches to bring back into the classroom. As part of our Indigenous traditions when picking medicines, we left an offering of tobacco to the Creator Mother Earth. Back in the classroom, we boiled the cedar in a pot of water so the children could taste cedar tea. We talked about cedar being one of the four medicines used in our daily smudge/cleanse. Later, during playtime in Kayla's class, two girls were playing in the home centre. They picked items from the floor as if they were cedar foliage and placed them in a jug. While one of the girls pretended to drink from the jug, the AHS educator asked: "Is that cedar tea?"

### **Introduction**

Supporting Indigenous children's learning of Indigenous language, cultural practices, and teachings is an important part of the curriculum in AHS classrooms (Ontario Aboriginal Head Start Association, 2017). Eugema, Kayla and Tina, the three AHS educators co-authoring this paper,

extend children's Indigenous cultural learning by making connections to the Indigenous culture when participating in the children's play in their Aboriginal Head Start classrooms in northern Ontario.

In this article, we report on an inquiry project where the three educators used video recording to document children's cultural learning during dramatic play with Indigenous cultural materials and then discussed the children's cultural learning with each other and with other Indigenous educators. We looked at ways that the children, aged 2–5 years, interacted with Indigenous cultural materials and used the Ojibway language in their dramatic play.

We begin by describing the goals and components of AHS in Ontario and the context in which AHS has been initiated, then introduce the theoretical underpinnings of our inquiry. We introduce ourselves and our inquiry practices (we use this term for educators' investigation into new practices rather than for children's inquiry, as the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2014) documents suggest). We present our findings through telling stories from the three educators' AHS classrooms. We conclude with a summary of what we have learned and explain how the findings will inform future practice. We propose suggestions for ways that non-Indigenous educators might integrate dramatic play related to Indigenous cultural teachings and the cultural practices of the families of children in their early years settings.

### **Aboriginal Head Start in Ontario**

Ontario's AHS Initiative was launched in 1995. The goal was to support Indigenous parents and children who live in urban centres and large northern communities in building a better future for themselves (Government of Canada, 2010). AHS pre-school programs are intended to enhance Indigenous children's academic success and cultural awareness and aid their development of a positive sense of identity and belonging (Barrieau & Ireland, 2003; Ontario Aboriginal Head Start Association, 2017). Throughout

### **Smudging to Start the Day**

At our AHS, we start the morning with a smudge/cleanse to show that we are thankful that we are here for a brand-new day. The smudge consists of four sacred medicines: sage, cedar, tobacco, and sweet grass that are grown in our AHS yard. The medicines are combined and placed in a smudge bowl or a large clam shell and lit with matches. During this smudging ceremony, we say Ojibway words such as *shkoday* (fire), *miigwan* (feather), and *meegwetch* (thank you). Girls cannot sit on the ground, so they sit on their knees. Boys can sit crossed-legged. During a smudge ceremony, a woman who is menstruating (moon-time) does not use, carry, or touch any of the four medicines. We begin to brush the smoke unto our bodies to cleanse our eyes, so that we will see good things; our ears, to hear good things; our mouths, to say good things; our hands, for gentle touches; and our hearts. During the smudging ceremony, the smudge bowl is passed clockwise within a circle to those who would like to participate.

the history of AHS, educators, parents and other family and community members have designed curriculum and administered the programs together (Ngyuen, 2011).

Of the six components of AHS, the revival and retention of Indigenous cultures and languages is primary. Children in AHS programs participate in activities that feature their communities' languages, values, beliefs, and cultural practices, which are integrated into all aspects of daily programming, and administration.

Parental involvement is a very important component of AHS. Parents volunteer to tell stories, read to children, and do crafts and baking with them. Alongside their children, they learn their Indigenous communities' languages and engage in Indigenous cultural activities.

A third component is education and school readiness, as the AHS program is intended to prepare children for a smooth transition into elementary school and provide a foundation for children to enjoy life-long learning. Health promotion is a fourth component, involving partnerships with various local health agencies and providers (dentists, speech therapists, physiotherapists, etc.), as well as engaging children in indoor and outdoor play to promote a healthy and active lifestyle. A fifth component, nutrition, is addressed by introducing children to healthy foods, including those of the children's Indigenous cultures. A sixth component, social support, involves supporting parents' awareness and use of resources and services within the community (Ontario Aboriginal Head Start Association, 2017).

In this article, we focus on the first component, supporting Indigenous children's learning of their communities' languages and culture. We believe that this component is especially important in countering the assimilationist and genocidal policies and practices of governments (Battiste, 2008; McCarty & Nicholas, 2014; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). From 1880 to the latter part of the twentieth century, staff in federally sponsored and church-administered residential schools prohibited Indigenous children's use of their own languages and cultural practices, enforcing the prohibition with harsh punishment (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Because children were taken from their families and forced to attend residential schools, they did not experience intergenerational transmission of important cultural teachings. Overcoming the impact of residential schools on individuals, their families, and communities requires programs such as the AHS Initiative. These programs support future generations of Indigenous children as they become knowledgeable about and take

pride in using their Indigenous languages and engage in their communities' cultural practices (Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir, & Muir, 2010; Styres, 2017).

### **Theoretical Perspectives of Our Inquiry**

Our inquiry is based on a recognition of children as "competent, capable of complex thinking, curious, and rich in potential" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 6) and of the process of inquiry as a socially and culturally mediated meaning-making and knowledge construction practice (Fosnot, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Also underpinning our inquiry is an understanding that play environments should provide children with "freedom and support to be creative, communicative, imaginative, participatory, and active" (Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2014, p. 177). Children make sense of experience by drawing on their funds of knowledge and applying the familiar to new contexts created in their dramatic play (Hedges, Cullen & Jordan, 2011; Whitebread, 2010). A final theoretical assumption underpinning our inquiry is that play is a culturally and contextually situated practice, where "everything that children play at, or play with, is influenced by wider social, historical, and cultural factors" (Wood, 2013, p. 8). Notions of appropriate play objects and types of play activities, as well as the appropriate role of adults in children's play in classrooms, are culturally based. In AHS programs, these notions are influenced by the values, perspectives, and cultural beliefs of the AHS families, educators, and administrators, as well as by the goals, curriculum, and history of the provincial AHS program and the cultural views of the local Indigenous communities.

We chose dramatic play as the context for our inquiry because of its important contributions to children's learning and to their symbolic thinking and imagination (Bodrova & Leong, 2011). When children assign meanings to objects in their play (e.g., when the children used a jug as a teapot), they are engaging in abstract thinking, separating the meaning of the object from its form as part of the pretend narrative. We use Dunn's (2008) view of dramatic play as "the most improvisational and spontaneous of all the dramatic forms. Here the participant, either individually or in a group, freely manipulates the elements of drama, such as role, place, time, symbol, and tension, to create a dramatic world" (p. 164), drawing on background knowledge, experience, and imagination (Barrs, Barton, & Booth, 2012). Dramatic play provides a culturally relevant learning environment (Ladson-Billings, 1995) for children to imitate Indigenous cultural practices and make sense of Indigenous teachings that are part of the AHS curriculum.

### Introducing the Co-authors

According to Styres (2017), “locating ourselves in relation to everything we do is one of the key foundational principles of Indigeneity. The only place from which any of us can write or speak with some degree of certainty is from the position of who we are in relation to what we know” (p. 7). Accordingly, we authors position ourselves culturally and geographically, as part of what Styres identifies as “a relational, respectful, and reciprocal process” (p. 7) in the author–reader relationship.

Three authors of this article are early childhood educators; all have their RECE designation and Indigenous family roots, and teach in a Northern Ontario AHS program. The fourth author is a non-Indigenous university professor and former primary teacher in rural Alberta. The four of us have been working together over the past three years on mini-inquiries that address goals set by the early childhood educators. We have been meeting approximately every two months in the AHS school to talk about children’s Indigenous cultural learning as demonstrated in their dramatic play.

### Inquiry Practices

The educators’ inquiry projects began when they set up centres with materials used in Indigenous cultural practices. They videorecorded children’s interactions during dramatic play activities at that centre using an iPod placed on a tripod. Each video recording was of children whose parents had given consent for the video recording. Our use of video recordings highlights the importance of documentation to “find meaning in what children do and what they experience” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 21) and of using the videos to explore how and what children learn. We are reporting on seven video recordings of 2–8 minutes in length, chosen as representative of children’s play in seven different centres with materials of Indigenous cultural practices.

As part of our inquiry, we held a meeting with six other Indigenous educators from AHS and Northern Ontario First Nations communities to broaden and deepen our interpretation of the children’s Indigenous cultural knowledge as enacted in their dramatic play. We based our interpretations on Battiste’s (2008) definition of Indigenous knowledge as:

the complex set of languages, teachings, and technologies developed and sustained by Indigenous civilizations. Often oral and symbolic, it is transmitted through performance and the structure of Indigenous languages and passed on to the next generation through

oral tradition in modeling, ceremonies, problem-solving, and animation, rather than through the written word. Indigenous Knowledge is typically embedded in the cumulative experiences and teachings of Indigenous peoples rather than in a library or in journals of applied research. (p. 87)

In this three-hour meeting, we all viewed the seven videos recorded by the three AHS educators multiple times and discussed in groups of three the evidence of children’s Indigenous cultural knowledge in their dramatic play. Each group then discussed its interpretations with the whole group. The whole-group discussions were audiorecorded. The authors of this article later listened to the audio recordings and used the recorded interpretation discussions to inform our writing of this article.

Two themes emerged from these interpretation discussions:

- 1) In their dramatic play with cultural materials, participating Indigenous children imitated Indigenous cultural practices carried out in the home, at sacred ceremonies, and on the land; and
- 2) Children showed that they understood Ojibway words but did not use them in their dramatic play.

We describe two examples showing how children demonstrated Indigenous cultural practices and one example of how they showed their understanding of Ojibway in their dramatic play. Each educator describes the cultural practices in her own voice.

### Imitating Indigenous Cultural Practices

Examples of children imitating Indigenous cultural practices are from Kayla’s and Eugema’s classrooms and involve children playing with dolls that were placed in a *tikinagan*, which is a cradle board, or dressing up in a jingle dress to do a jingle dance.

#### Swaddling a baby in a *tikinagan* (cradle board)

In Kayla’s classroom of 3–4 year-old children, the cultural play inquiry project was in the home centre. Each item in the home centre was strategically placed and all items had a specific cultural purpose. These items included *tikinagans*, Indigenous and non-Indigenous baby dolls, dress-up and doll clothes, play food, a telephone, a clock, blankets, rattles, and other toys geared towards infants (e.g., soft books and textured items), and kitchen items (e.g., cups, cutlery, table, plates, high chairs, change table). There were also pictures on display of babies in *tikinagans*, grandparents

holding a baby in a *tikinagan*, and blended families eating supper at a table. Ojibway words on the displays included: *Kokum* [Grandma] and *Mishomis* [Grandpa]. In this inviting environment with both familiar and unfamiliar items, the goal was for the children's play to be reflective of family cultural practices that were salient to them. *Tikinagans*, for example, were in many children's homes.

**Kayla:** *Tikinagans*, cradle boards used to carry an infant, are part of my and my students' Indigenous culture (see Figure 1 for a picture of two types of *tikinagans*). A vital part of child-rearing in our Indigenous communities, *tikinagans* are very practical for mothers when traveling. They can even be propped up so babies can watch their surroundings. The *tikinagan* that I am familiar with has a hard back and is usually made from pine or cedar, with leather used to lace or bind the baby inside. Other Indigenous communities make *tikinagans* with soft backs. In some communities *tikinagans* are made with wooden hoops attached to the top. The hoop acts as a protector for the baby's head if the *tikinagan* falls over and provides shade when the baby is in the sun.

In one video I recorded in my classroom, Fallan (all children's names are pseudonyms) took the *tikinagan* that was propped up in the kitchen, laid it flat on the floor, and began to undo the laces. When I asked her

what she was doing, she said, "Taking the baby out." I then used the Ojibway word, saying, "Oh, you're taking the baby out of the *tikinagan*?" She showed that she had observed how to unlace and then swaddle the baby in the *tikinagan* so that it could not move. I talked with Fallan about the teachings I grew up with: that babies are put into *tikinagans* because they are not supposed to touch Mother Earth. I was also taught that *tikinagans* would benefit the infant with longer sleep, since the baby was swaddled tightly and could not move, like when it was in the mother's womb. I was also taught that when babies are in *tikinagans*, they become stronger because their backbone and legs are kept straight. This strengthens the infant's neck muscles and enhances other senses, such as vision and hearing, as well as their awareness of their surroundings. The home centre play setting provides an authentic context for the children and for me to use the Ojibway language. Children were able to use traditional objects while receiving the teachings.

In the AHS, we also use dramatic play contexts to share teachings about traditional clothing, as shown in the next description of children dancing in jingle dresses — a practice recorded in one of the seven videos that were discussed in our interpretation conversations.

### Dancing a jingle dance at a powwow

In Eugema's classroom of 3–5-year-old children, the cultural play inquiry project centred on a dramatic play centre with a teepee, which provided the children with a feeling of home and getting ready for a powwow. Fake fur in the interior of the teepee made a soft place for the children to lie down amidst pieces of birch bark wood, wooden bowls, and spoons. Powwows are spiritual gatherings involving sacred music and dancing that bring people together to honour their culture.

One of the dances, the jingle dance, is danced by females wearing jingle dresses. It is believed that women, who carry and give birth to children, have a lot of power. The skirt of the jingle dress is a circle representing no beginning and no end. The skirt touches the ground so that Mother Earth will recognize the female wearing it. Jingle dresses are usually made from solid-colour fabric with many jingles sewn closely together, either onto the dress or on ribbons sewn on the sleeves, top, and bottom of the dress (see Figure 2). These jingles, traditionally made of seashells, make a "tink, tink" rain-like sound. The metal cones are called *ziibaaska'iganan* in Ojibway.



Figure 1: Dolls in Tikinagans



**Figure 2: Jingle Dress**

**Eugema:** In one video I recorded in my classroom, three girls, Sun, Moon, and Wind, were wearing the jingle dresses as powwow music was heard in the background. The girls pretended that they were getting ready for a powwow. Moon asked Wind to help her close her dress up in the back. Then Wind twirled and did a few dance steps. Sun then asked Wind for help to tie up the back of her dress and bounced to make her jingles “tink” as if rain were falling. The girls jumped around to hear the jingles. Wind showed that she has experience preparing for jingle dances, as she oversaw the preparations.

As the girls danced, I had an opportunity to share the teachings I have learned from stories about the jingle dance. In one story, about a medicine man and his ill daughter, the medicine man “had a dream about a dress with all these jingling cones hanging off the material. He spent days making the dress, put it on her, lifted her up to try to make her dance, and, when she finally was able to dance, she got better” (Sexsmith, 2003, p. 28). I explained that these are teachings I have learned, but it was important to respect every Indigenous culture’s teachings, as other cultures’ teachings may be different.

In the dramatic play with Indigenous cultural clothing, all children were respected for their knowledge of getting ready for a powwow and dancing to the music. Their curiosity and awareness of their Indigenous community’s culture were nurtured as they had fun while learning through play.

In our AHS, we use dramatic play to teach Ojibway words and traditional practices on the land, such as hunting and

the gathering of traditional foods, as well as practices in homes and at sacred ceremonies, as we show in the next classroom vignette from Tina’s classroom.

### Showing Understanding of Ojibway Words

We present an example of children showing their understanding of Ojibway words but not using the words in dramatic play in Tina’s classroom of 2–3-year-old children where the cultural play centred on a *makwa* [bear] cave.

**Tina:** With the goal of children learning about animal shelters and traditional hunting practices, I set up a large cardboard box as a cave area that animals would use as their home. Children painted the cave (see Figure 3). Our discussion while we were together in the cave was about how wild forest animals use the land as their homes and about the hibernation of certain animals. I shared with children that the *makwa* was used for food by some Indigenous communities but others viewed the *makwa* as a spiritual animal and protector; as told in teachings and legends. A discussion of foods eaten by the *makwa* (e.g., fish and berries) led to the children’s stories about going fishing and berry picking with their families.

Real-life items such as a *mtik*, which is a tree, as well as branches, and twigs, were set out as the ground of the cave. I set up an artificial *mtik* outside the cave, along with two *amik* [beaver] at its base. The *amik*



**Figure 3: Makwa Cave**

appeared to be chewing the trunk of the *mtik*. I talked with the children about how the *amik* uses its large teeth to break the wood and uses the wood to make its own home, a beaver dam. We also discussed how the beaver is a consistent source of food for our Indigenous communities.

We talked about how some Indigenous families, including those living in urban areas, remain involved in the traditions of hunting and are passing down these practices to the next generation. These families leave the city to travel back to their First Nations communities to hunt and gather food to feed themselves and share with their extended families. This conversation led us to talking about another source of food, the *wabooz* [rabbit]. It is trapped using a technique called *snaring* that is still practiced today. While children touched an actual rabbit skin, we talked about how to skin a rabbit and how the fur is used for clothing such as the insulation in mittens and moccasins. We also talked about the more prominent sources of wild game food: *waawaashkesh* [deer] and *mooz* [moose]. They are hunted in the fall season and prepared and preserved for eating through the winter months. While handling a set of antlers, children observed demonstrations of how the antlers can be used as tools for scraping hides and of how clothing and traditional drums can be made from moose and deer hides. Animals that are hunted and killed for food are never wasted, as the whole animal is used; meat is for consumption, while the other parts of the animal can be used for clothing and other purposes. To give thanks (*Meegwetch*) for the gift of food, an offering of tobacco is given. Visual aids, such as pictures of the animals along with the Ojibway words for the animals, were posted by the *makwa* cave.

In one video I recorded in my classroom, Tori set up the stuffed animals in the cave and said that the animals were sleeping, now that it was winter. I reinforced their learning of the Ojibway words for the animals through encouraging the children to join me in singing a song (see Figure 4) while the children pretended that the animals were hibernating and then waking up in the spring. I find that children learn new words when I introduce the words through songs and use them when participating in dramatic play. I believe that when young children hear the words over and over throughout the days and weeks, they will eventually use the words.

In another video, Bradley brought play food from the kitchen centre, feeding the toy *makwa* some *giigoon* [fish] while having a picnic in the cave. In a third video, Sarah built a *wabooz* home out of the branches and twigs in the cave. In these cases, I described what the children

Are you sleeping? Are you sleeping?  
*Kee nee baa naa? Kee nee baa naa?*

Bear Bear, Bear Bear  
*Makwa Makwa, Makwa Makwa*

Morning bells are ringing, Morning bells are ringing  
*A shaa, Kii Mad Way Sin, A shaa, Kii Mad Way Sin*

Go to sleep, Go to sleep  
*Kee Nee Baa, Kee Nee Baa*

Wake up now, Wake up now  
*O Nish Kan, O Nish Kan*

Makwa can be replaced with other animals:

Waawaashkesh [Deer]

Moos [Moose]

Waabooz [Rabbit]

Abinoojiiwak [Children]

**Figure 4: Are You Sleeping?/Frère Jacques (with English and Ojibway words)**

were doing using the Ojibway words for the animals. When I asked children about the animals, they showed their understanding of the Ojibway words by picking up the stuffed animal that was named. The children sang the song with me, but they did not use the words in their independent dramatic play.

### What We Have Learned from Our Inquiry

Our inquiry into Indigenous children's dramatic play with cultural materials, based on an analysis of video recordings of their play, shows that the children imitated Indigenous cultural practices in the home (e.g., securing and carrying a baby in a *tikinagan*), on the land (e.g., gathering cedar foliage and making cedar tea), and in sacred practices (e.g., putting on a jingle dress and dancing a jingle dance at a powwow). Their community's Indigenous knowledge, passed on through modeling by adults in their homes, through their communities' sacred ceremonies, and through approaches to problem-solving and ways of viewing the world that are embedded in families' and community members' experiences and teachings (Battiste, 2008), was enacted in children's dramatic play with Indigenous cultural

materials. The three AHS educators' modeling took the form of participating in the play, listening to "how children are finding and making meaning" (Rogers & Evans, 2008, p. 120), and sharing Indigenous teachings that extend children's understandings as they engaged in dramatic play.

The educators demonstrated practices, provided explanations, and shared stories in order to "respond to children's interests, make connections between children's goals and curriculum goals, and build on [children's] working theories and funds of knowledge" (Wood, 2013, p. 73). Consistent with traditional ways of passing on Indigenous knowledge (Battiste, 2008; Styres, 2011) and with Vygotskian theories of pedagogies of play (Bodrova & Leong, 2011), the three educators participated in play with Indigenous cultural objects to deepen and extend children's cultural learning. These real-life experiences help broaden and deepen children's funds of Indigenous knowledge (Hedges, Cullen, & Jordan, 2011; Whitebread, 2010) for their dramatic play with Indigenous cultural materials.

As Rogers and Evans (2008) have proposed, we found that videorecording the play interactions and then talking about the interactions with Indigenous colleagues provided valuable information about children's learning as well as starting points for planning ways to deepen that learning in future. Talking with Indigenous colleagues about the children's imitation of Indigenous cultural practices in their dramatic play has been valuable in "making children's learning and understanding of the world around them visible" to us (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 21). However, as is recommended by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2014), we believe it is important to use the video recordings in conversations with the children and their families to deepen children's Indigenous cultural knowledge and build relationships with children's families. Future inquiries will examine ways to construct understandings of the children's learning and Indigenous cultural knowledge collaboratively with the children and their families.

As Indigenous researchers and theorists have explained, learning Indigenous languages is of critical importance. Language and culture are inseparable as "each language reflects a unique world-view and culture complex, mirroring the manner in which a speech community has resolved its problems in dealing with the world and has formulated its thinking, its system of philosophy and understanding of the world around it" (Wurm, 2001, p. 13). Fostering children's Indigenous language learning is an important part of the AHS program. Children demonstrated that their receptive understanding of the Ojibway language was strong (e.g., they picked up objects identified by educators), but they did not express themselves in Ojibway in their dramatic play.

Given that dramatic play has been shown to support children's language competence (Rogers & Evans, 2008), our future inquiry projects will involve new ways to foster children's use of their Ojibway language in dramatic play with Indigenous cultural materials. We noticed that the AHS children used Ojibway words in the activities that were repeated daily, for example, smudging/cleansing, eating snacks and lunch, during rest time, and when going in and out of the van that transports them between their homes and the AHS site (the educators took turns supervising children while enroute). Drawing on these observations and on the interpretations of children's dramatic play in the seven videos, in future inquiries the three AHS educators will endeavour to participate more frequently in dramatic play with Indigenous cultural objects, using Ojibway words in context. We hope that repeated, contextualized use of the language will encourage children's use of the language in their dramatic play.

### **Integrating Indigenous Cultural Play in non-Indigenous Classrooms**

The implications of what we have learned can stretch beyond AHS classrooms to preschool and primary classrooms throughout Ontario. Consistent with recommendations of the Ontario Ministry of Education (2014), we suggest that educators use pedagogical documentation, such as video recordings of children's play, to provide an enduring window into children's learning in three spheres: belonging (feeling connected to and valued by others), well-being (physical and mental health and wellness), and engagement (exploring, being involved and focused as problem solvers and creative thinkers). In our AHS classrooms, we added the sphere of enacting and valuing cultural knowledge (beliefs, values, perspectives, experiences, and language) to the three outlined by the Ontario Ministry of Education. Videos can be viewed and discussed with colleagues, families, and the children in terms of the children's construction of cultural knowledge of their communities and learning in the three spheres described by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2014).

With sensitivity, in an effort to avoid cultural appropriation, non-Indigenous educators who wish to incorporate Indigenous culture into their early years programs might provide Indigenous cultural materials for children to use in dramatic play. We recommend bringing in objects from the natural world and encouraging children to explore how the land provides for basic needs. Natural objects are of great importance to non-Indigenous children's coming to know about Indigenous cultures, as "land informs pedagogy through storied relationships that are etched into the essence of every rock, tree, seed, animal, pathway, and

waterway in relation to the Aboriginal people who have existed on the land since time immemorial” (Styres, 2011, p. 721). It is important to find out as much as possible regarding the Indigenous culture in each educator’s area; beliefs and traditions are different in different communities. If non-Indigenous educators choose to meet with an elder or medicine person, we recommend that they offer tobacco to show respect.

**Educators can also access resources teaching Indigenous knowledge on websites of:**

1. local Indigenous communities (e.g., <http://www.wikwemikongheritage.org/LanguageResources.html>)
2. universities (e.g., [http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/deepeningknowledge/UserFiles/File/Turtle\\_Island.pdf](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/deepeningknowledge/UserFiles/File/Turtle_Island.pdf)) or from
3. federal government bodies, such as Indigenous and Northern Affairs (e.g., <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1316530132377/1316530184659> has six themes that can be adapted for young children).

A book recommended for young children, *When We Were Alone* (Robertson, 2016), is a story of empowerment and strength in which a grandmother answers her granddaughter’s questions and in the process tells about her years in a residential school.

To teach Indigenous languages, educators might invite children to sing songs to familiar melodies, such as the one about animals sleeping shared earlier in this paper, using the Indigenous languages of nearby Indigenous communities. Educators might also take up a teaching practice that the three AHS educators have found useful for teaching Ojibway. We work with children to create posters and books based on patterned books, such as Martin’s (1967) *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*, using Ojibway words for the animals (see Figure 5)

Regardless of the classroom context, we believe that modeling cultural practices and contextualized use of target languages by educators, family members, and other members of the community enriches children’s funds of knowledge. Additionally, dramatic play with cultural materials provides a space in early years settings for children to imitate and make sense of cultural practices of their own and other cultures.

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***Kiiyaande Makwa, Kiiyaande Makwa,  
what do you see?***

I see a Red Bird looking at me.

I see a Mskwaa Bneshiinh looking at me

This pattern is repeated with these words:

Yellow Duck – *Zaawaa Sheesheeb*

White Dog – *Waabskaa Niimosh*

Black Cat – *Mkadewaa Gaazhak*

Blue Horse – *Miinande Bezhgoogzhii*

Green Frog – *Zhaawshkwaa Makkii*

**Figure 5: *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* (Bill Martin Jr.’s pattern book in English and Ojibway)**

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