
NATIVE LITERACY PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PROJECT

The Project

In 1999 The Centre for Literacy received a grant from Rotary International, Old Montreal Chapter to develop a collection of resources to aid pre-school education in native communities. It was decided to produce a series of mini-collections housed in small "Rubbermaid" boxes each distinctly designated for a particular native community in Eastern Canada. The communities in Quebec are: Kahnawake (Mohawk); Chisasibi (Cree); and Kuujjuak (Inuit). The three Mi'kmaq communities in Atlantic Canada are: Eskasoni (Cape Breton), Nova Scotia; Big Cove, New Brunswick; and Newfoundland. Once the materials are purchased, labeled, and organized the collections are to be sent to the designated communities for the school year. During the summers they will be returned to the Centre for Literacy to be evaluated and where necessary repaired and updated, then returned to the community for the following school year.

Resources

After consulting with all six communities priorities were established for the contents ranging from instructional materials to activity books, games, and object-oriented items. The main concern across all communities is that the contents reflect culturally relevant material and where possible some of it to be in their first language. While researching these ideas it quickly became obvious that there is no single clearinghouse of native resources, although there are beginning to be small concentrations of activity across the country. ([See our list of selected sources.](#))

Personally, it has been a learning experience tracking down first language materials for the appropriate age levels. Many native educators in these communities are just beginning to produce their own books and activities for the children as their need arises. They are absorbed with teaching which leaves little time to work on the development of materials. They are interested in any work being done by other native communities whether or not it is in their own native language. For the preschool level often teachers are willing to use books with no text that are illustrated with culturally relevant pictures; the text they can provide themselves. Our job has been to find some of these resources and make them available in the mini-collections.

Contacts

To deepen my understanding of what is happening in native education I had the opportunity in mid-April to attend ANTEC, the Atlantic Native Teacher's Education Conference in Eskasoni (Cape Breton), NS. The conference, last held in 1993, was well attended with over 500 registrants. The two days were packed with workshops covering topics such as arts and crafts, native learning styles, ADD, ADHD, FAS, and diabetes in native peoples, curriculum development, spirituality, native identity, teaching with the Internet, self-esteem, student conflict, literacy, first language curriculum, school and

athletics, writing for success, poetry, etc.

Registrants from all across the Atlantic seaboard, including Maine. Most attendees were Mi'kmaq teachers as the Mi'kmaq nation covers this whole area, but there were also non-native teachers and administrators who teach native students in the regular school systems. The conference was held in Eskasoni, the reserve with the largest concentration of Mi'kmaq speakers in Nova Scotia.

The conference gave me the opportunity to meet many teachers and to listen to their ideas. At a meeting with day-care, pre-school and Kindergarten teachers I found them very receptive to new native resources they had never seen. I met with Dolores Sock, the Coordinator for Native Students, New Brunswick, Department of Education, District 16. She was very interested in the mini-collection and thought that in her area the best distribution would be to build professional development workshops around it. The Curriculum Developer and some teachers from the Inuit community in Goose Bay (Labrador), Newfoundland are hoping to keep in touch with us and see how they can best use our services. A meeting with Mary Rose Julian, Coordinator of the Centre of Excellence, provided me with an in depth look at one example of curriculum development and translation being done on a large scale to provide materials in first language instruction. I also had several conversations with Helen Sylliboy, a local language technician and translator. She has translated several of the stories and legends published by the University College of Cape Breton Press and has been a contributor to the recently published Mi'kmaq New Testament Bible in addition to helping with the productions of the Centre of Excellence. Numerous other teachers stopped by our display table in the Library during the two days and we had very fruitful conversations.

Summary

Although the evidence is strong that there is much work being done in translation and teaching, the Mi'kmaq people are still concerned about how to encourage the young people to use their first language. Even with instruction in school, many parents are not familiar with it and cannot help their children. There is the feeling that even despite the effort and wonderful work, that Mi'kmaq is still an endangered language. This may also be true for other native languages.

The conference was a fascinating learning experience and I am grateful to Rotary International and The Centre for Literacy for supporting my attendance. The mini-collections will be further developed over the next month and deposited in the designated communities during the 2000-2001 school year.

Meg Sinclair

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