

# **What Really Matters in Family Literacy?**

## **A Saskatchewan-based, Interorganizational Research Project**

### **Phase 2, Fall, 2009**

#### **An Invitation to Participate**

In the fall of 2009 literacy providers throughout Saskatchewan will be contacted and asked to participate in the second phase of a province-wide research project on what really matters in family literacy. The first phase, which was implemented in 2008, developed a broad overview of family literacy in our province. The report on this initial phase has been completed and is now available on-line (go to [www.mcdowellfoundation.ca](http://www.mcdowellfoundation.ca)).

In the second phase researchers will be organizing focus groups, interviews and town hall meetings to explore in greater depth how family literacy programs affect the lives of the people they serve. From the information gathered in this phase, a second report will be developed that discusses the impact of family literacy on:

- Parenting practices;
- Children's school experiences;
- Family and cultural values regarding education;
- Adult participation in educational opportunities;
- Adult participation in societal processes and opportunities;
- Life transitions, e.g., from home to school to work.

Literacy providers from schools, preschools, regional colleges, public libraries, First Nations, post-secondary education institutions, advocacy and support groups, community organizations, health regions, and literacy agencies will be contacted in the coming months and asked to share their views and experiences related to family literacy. Their collective wisdom will be used to inform provincial policies and programs on family literacy, draw conclusions about possible directions for future family literacy programs, help build a network of people involved in family literacy, and develop understanding and support for family literacy in Saskatchewan.

#### **The Importance of Family Literacy**

Literacy includes skills, knowledge and attitudes that develop over time. From birth to death, we are all increasing our literacy in areas such as reading, writing, oracy, mathematics, the arts and technology. Literacy development is a lifelong process that needs support at different times in different ways, depending on the age, needs and circumstances of the learner.

In the process of becoming more and more literate, most of us have one constant support – our family. It is family members who guide us in daily life and in all our life transitions from early childhood to elementary and high school, post-secondary education, the work place, job training and retraining, community leadership, retirement, volunteer activities and old age. To become a literate society, we need to understand that families are at the centre of literacy and strengthen the family in its support of literacy.

In this research project family literacy is understood very broadly. Family literacy is:

- *Generic.* Although many people think of literacy as the ability to read and write, it also includes knowledge and skills related to mathematics, technology or the arts. There are multiple literacies within family literacy.

- *Developmental.* Literacy grows as people develop and learn. You begin to become literate as a baby when you acquire the ability to express yourself and understand others. You continue to develop your literacy right into old age.
- *Family-based.* The family is a community that educates its members. Within every family there are people with different levels and kinds of learning. Family members share their knowledge and skills with each other.
- *Reciprocal and Intergenerational.* In the family people of all ages teach each other and learn from each other. Everyone is both a teacher and a learner.
- *Part of Everyday Life.* Family literacy events and activities occur as family members go about their daily routines and cultural practices. Learning does not take place in a school or at a specific time. Family literacy may complement formal schooling, or it may challenge it.
- *Socially and Culturally Diverse.* The family is a social and cultural institution that varies widely. Family literacy activities may look different in an extended family, non-traditional family or one of many possible cultural variations of the family. For example, in some families oral language (as in storytelling) may be more important than the printed word. Cultural diversity needs to be recognized and honoured.
- *Dynamic.* Family literacy changes as society changes. It is continually shifting to meet new needs and priorities.

*What Really Matters in Family Literacy* has grown out of the belief shared by many people that family literacy is a vital part of our education system that needs to be better understood and strengthened. Although programs that support family literacy are not new in our province, they have tended to be isolated, short-term and project-based. This research aims to facilitate the development of sound strategies for enhancing family literacy, the sharing of knowledge as to what works and what doesn't work, and the development of vibrant partnerships between family literacy stakeholders.

### **Sponsors of the Research**

The Saskatchewan Literacy Office is providing the funding needed to carry out this important exploration of family literacy in Saskatchewan. An initial grant of \$10,000 supported the organization of an Early and Family Literacy Forum, at which literacy stakeholders confirmed the need for collaborative research into what is happening and what really matters in family literacy. Following the forum, an interorganizational research panel was put together to submit a research proposal to the Literacy Office for a two-phase project. The first phase of the project was carried out in 2008 with a second grant of \$30,000 from the Literacy Office, and a further grant of \$50,000 has now been awarded to proceed with the second phase of the project.

Administering the project on behalf of the interorganizational group is the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching, a charitable organization established by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation to support research into teaching and learning.

### **The Research Team**

The McDowell Foundation has contracted with Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, to design and implement the research with guidance from an interorganizational Family Literacy Research Panel. Dr. Wason-Ellam has an impressive record

of research into reading and literacy. She has received numerous grants and authored a wide range of publications, bringing immigrant, inner-city, Aboriginal and global perspectives to develop greater understanding of the social worlds of children. Working with Dr. Wason-Ellam is Joanie Crandall, a graduate student from the University of Saskatchewan.

### **The Interorganizational Family Literacy Research Panel**

The panel is composed of:

Patti Byers, Nipawin  
 Hilary Dahnke, Executive Director, Regina Family Literacy Network  
 Elaine Ebenal, Executive Director, Saskatchewan Literacy Network  
 Cheryl Erlandson, Director, Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit  
 Verna Gallén, Project Manager, McDowell Foundation  
 Sheryl Harrow, Director, READ Saskatoon  
 Sheila Pocha, Principal, Sutherland Community School, Saskatoon  
 Alice Samkoe, Literacy Programming Supervisor, Regina Public Library  
 Charlotte Schindelka, Fort Qu'Appelle  
 Cathy Sieben, Program Facilitator, Family Support Centres, Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools  
 Carol Vandale, Executive Director, Saskatchewan Aboriginal Literacy Network  
 Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan

### **Timelines for the Research**

Phase two of the project will be carried out in 2009. Researchers will be contacting literacy providers and organizing focus groups and interviews throughout the months of September, October and November. Following analysis and review by the interorganizational Research Panel, a final report on phase one will be submitted to the Saskatchewan Literacy Office at the end of March 2009. Later in the year the report will be made available to the public on the McDowell Foundation website and distributed widely to family literacy stakeholders throughout Saskatchewan.

### **To find out more about this research project, contact:**

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