

What Really Matters in Family Literacy? Research Proposal – Year Two

**Developed for the Dr. Stirling McDowell
Foundation for Research into Teaching and the
Saskatchewan Family Literacy Research Panel**

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PART I: A RECAP OF OUR WORK TO UNDERSTAND FAMILY LITERACY IN SASKATCHEWAN

Uncovering the Gaps in Our Understanding

The Early and Family Literacy Stakeholders' Forum

In the spring of 2006, a small group of representatives from the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, the Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit (SPDU), the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching, and the College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, formed a steering committee to spearhead the development of a collaborative research project into early and family literacy in Saskatchewan. The McDowell Foundation received funding from the Saskatchewan Literacy Commission to implement a process for developing a detailed research proposal to the Commission in consultation with literacy stakeholders in Saskatchewan.

The first step in the process was to bring together a broad range of individuals who have a stake in early and family literacy in Saskatchewan. Over 50 invitations were extended to participate in an Early and Family Literacy Stakeholders' Forum that was held in Saskatoon on February 5, 2007. Twenty-five people attended the forum, including teachers and school-based administrators from K-12 and alternative schools, school division consultants, literacy facilitators in regional and city libraries, regional college literacy coordinators, community agencies such as READ Saskatoon and the Regina Family Literacy Network, Saskatchewan Literacy Network representatives, a government literacy program manager and a speech-language pathologist from Public Health. These stakeholders participated in a facilitated discussion designed to elicit varying perspectives of early and family literacy in Saskatchewan (see Appendix 1 for a summary of the feedback received). The discussion indicated that there was general interest in and support for the development of a research project into early and family literacy in Saskatchewan. Numerous needs for information and research were identified (see Appendix 2).

Collaboration on a Family Literacy Research Proposal

The forum was also used as an opportunity to invite interested stakeholders to join the steering committee on a research panel providing guidance for the development of this research proposal to the Literacy Commission. A number of people expressed interest but were unable to accommodate their schedules to the short timelines for developing the proposal. Comprising the initial research panel were:

Patti Byers, Principal, Central Park Elementary School, Nipawin
Crystal Clark, Regina Family Literacy Network
Cheryl Erlandson, SPDU
Verna Gallén, McDowell Foundation
Debbie Griffith, Saskatchewan Literacy Network (replaced by Marilyn Stearns and then Lisa Erickson)
Sheryl Harrow, READ Saskatoon
Cathy Sieben, Family Support Centres, Saskatoon Catholic Schools
Carol Vandale, Saskatchewan Aboriginal Literacy Network
Linda Wason-Ellam, University of Saskatchewan

The panel held its first meeting in Saskatoon on February 20, 2007, to consider the feedback from the Early and Family Literacy Stakeholders' Forum and develop directions for the proposed research. Among the lessons that the research panel drew from the forum were the following:

- The way that literacy is understood and approached is vitally important in the success of literacy programs; many people and programs still regard learners as at-risk rather than building confidence and engagement by validating their knowledge and abilities.
- Support for literacy tends to be provided through agencies that operate as “silos,” e.g., K-12 schools, health care services, or training institutions; the gaps between the “silos” tend to be filled by community agencies operating with short-term funding. An integrative approach to literacy that creates bridges and dissolves barriers is essential.
- When asked what is working in early and family literacy in Saskatchewan, stakeholders noted factors that affect success at the system, program and interpersonal levels; similarly, gaps were noted at all three levels in the programs and supports for early and family literacy in Saskatchewan.

Building on these lessons, the panel concluded that useful research into early and family research in Saskatchewan would provide information about the attitudes and philosophies on which literacy programs and practices are based, the effectiveness of the connections among literacy programs and their relationships to the communities they serve, the degree to which learners and their families are involved in all phases of literacy programming, the adequacy of funding, training and resources and the extent to which various programs provide outreach, public information and communications with respect to literacy. The primary audience for such information would be policy-makers and those who develop and administer literacy programs, with a secondary audience of teachers, literacy facilitators and learners.

On the advice of the research panel, the focus of the proposed research was changed to family literacy instead of early and family literacy. This change reflected the understanding of literacy articulated by both the stakeholders' forum and the research panel, in which family literacy is believed to be a vital foundation for all literacy programs. In this understanding, literacy encompasses lifelong learning of skills, knowledge and attitudes. The development of literacy is therefore a continuous process that needs support at different times in different ways, depending on the age, needs and circumstances of the learner. In this continuous process, there is at least one constant support – the family of the learner. Family members encourage and guide learners in daily life and in all their transitions through the stages of life, from early childhood through to elementary school, the middle years, high school, post-secondary education, the work place, job training and retraining, community leadership, retirement, voluntary activities and old age. Literacy programs and any research into literacy need to recognize that families are at the centre of literacy learning. The research panel took the time to develop a working definition and description of family literacy that was grounded in this fundamental reality.

A proposal for a two-phase research project incorporating the panel's views and suggestions was drafted by Verna Gallén and Linda Wason-Ellam for review at the panel's second meeting on March 20, 2007. Final revisions were made and all panel members approved the proposal by e-mail prior to its submission to the Saskatchewan Literacy Commission at the end of March.

Implementation of Phase 1 of the Research

At the beginning of 2008, the Saskatchewan Literacy Office granted the McDowell Foundation the funding to implement the first year of the research, with the understanding that re-application could be made the following year to acquire the funding for year two. Timelines for the research were quickly revised and the research panel reformed with somewhat wider representation. Sitting on the year one research panel were:

Patti Byers, Principal, Central Park Elementary School, Nipawin
Hilary Dahnke, Regina Family Literacy Network
Cheryl Erlandson, SPDU
Verna Gallén, McDowell Foundation
Sheryl Harrow, READ Saskatoon
Sheila Pocha, Principal, W. P. Bate School, Saskatoon
Charlotte Schindelka, Balcarres
Cathy Sieben, Family Support Centres, Saskatoon Catholic Schools
Linda Wason-Ellam, University of Saskatchewan
Grant Young, Saskatchewan Literacy Network

Verna Gallén, as project administrator, worked with Linda Wason-Ellam as lead researcher to establish a framework for administering the project effectively. Joanie Crandall, a graduate student at the University of Saskatchewan, was hired as part of the research team, and work began on a literature review of family literacy and the development of a province-wide survey of family literacy programs.

The research panel met three times in 2008 to provide guidance for the research. The first meeting focussed on the implementation and communications plans for the project, including the questions to be asked in the survey of literacy providers and the identification of literacy programs for inclusion in the survey. At the second meeting, the panel provided insights into the initial results from the survey, and the final meeting of the year was used to assist the researchers with the development of the report to the Ministry of Education on the research results from year one.

To prepare family literacy stakeholders for participation in the research, communications were prepared and distributed by the literacy stakeholders represented on the panel. This information was also sent to directors of education in Saskatchewan, and a dialogue about the research was initiated at a meeting of First Nations directors of education. As the research unfolded, opportunities were found to profile the research at the annual conferences of the McDowell Foundation and the Saskatchewan Literacy Network.

An initial report on the research, detailing the findings from year one, has been prepared for submission to the Ministry of Education along with this proposal which re-applies for the second year of research funding. The initial report provides a province-wide snapshot of family literacy programs in Saskatchewan and makes recommendations for changes in the system by which family literacy programs are developed, funded, supported and evaluated in Saskatchewan. Included in the initial report is an inventory of family literacy programs in Saskatchewan and an annotated bibliography of literature on family literacy.

The Research Question and Objectives

The overarching research question for the proposed research is:

What really matters in family literacy in Saskatchewan?

Our goal is to understand as fully as possible the factors that provide a basis for success in supporting family literacy. We want to learn what works at the system, program and interpersonal levels, and why it works.

In pursuit of this goal, the panel identified four research objectives:

1. To clarify how family literacy is currently understood in Saskatchewan.
2. To identify how family literacy programs and practices are developed, delivered and evaluated in our province.

3. To assess the impact of current family literacy programs; for example:

- On parenting practices;
- On children's school success;
- On family values regarding education;
- On adult participation in educational opportunities;
- On life transitions; e.g., from home to school to work.

4. To draw conclusions about possible directions for future family literacy programs.

With the completion of phase one of the research project at the end of 2008, these objectives have been only partially achieved. The initial report on the first year of research indicates that much has been learned about the system and program levels of family literacy in Saskatchewan. The initial report provides an overview of family literacy programs in our province that clarifies the current understanding of family literacy. It also identifies directions that would enhance support for family literacy and articulates recommendations related to the vision, policies, administrative structures and programs that need to be established to actualize family literacy. Still needed, however, is research into experiences and practices that would enhance family literacy at the program and interpersonal levels.

The proposed research plan for phase two is designed to address this need. In this important phase, the focus of the research is directly on families and communities rather than institutions, recognizing that it is at the family and community level that literacy programs make a difference. The research is collaborative, bringing together diverse voices from across the province to share their experiences with family literacy and identify what does and doesn't work in the spectrum of lifelong literacy opportunities that enhance family literacy. As noted above in the statement of research goals, the emphasis in this phase is on the impact of family literacy practices and building on positive experiences that have led to success; for example, in parenting, schooling or home-school-work transitions.

An Overview of the Full Research Plan

What Really Matters in Family Literacy is a collaborative research project designed to unfold in two phases over two years. Guiding the research in both phases is a provincial advisory committee of approximately ten people with diverse experiences and perspectives related to family literacy.

The McDowell Foundation is the administrator of the project, acquiring and distributing the funding needed to support the research. The McDowell Foundation provides a project coordinator to hire researchers as needed, oversee the work of the research team and support the advisory committee in providing guidance for the research. Secretarial and other support for the team's work is provided through the McDowell Foundation and the University of Saskatchewan.

The research team for both phases of the research consists of a lead researcher under contract to the McDowell Foundation assisted by such graduate students as are necessary to carry out the research. Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, of the University of Saskatchewan, is the leader of the research team, identifies the research skills and assistance needed and provides any training that is necessary for team members.

The first phase of the research project focused on two major activities: (1) a review of the literature on family literacy in Saskatchewan and a selective review of pertinent literature on family literacy in Canada and elsewhere; and (2) an inventory and analysis of family literacy programs in Saskatchewan. These activities provided basic information on how family literacy is understood and family literacy programs are developed, implemented and evaluated in

Saskatchewan. At the end of phase one, an initial report on the research has been developed for the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education.

The second phase of the project is now necessary to add depth to the broad view provided by the literature review and province-wide inventory. The focus will be on gathering information in the field about the impact of family literacy programs in Saskatchewan. Data will be collected from samples of family literacy stakeholders and the general public through focus groups, interviews, town hall meetings and a case study.

As in the first phase of the project, it is necessary in the second phase to communicate with literacy stakeholders to develop their understanding and support for the research. Directors of education will be approached regarding the participation of schools within their jurisdictions, the community schools association and relevant special subject councils will be informed about the project, and teachers and literacy facilitators will be made aware of the project through websites, newsletters, conferences and conventions.

At the end of phase two, the data gathered in both phases will be reviewed, interpreted and synthesized. Conclusions will be drawn as appropriate for consideration by policy-makers, program developers and administrators, teachers and literacy facilitators, learners and the general public.

In the final stage of the research, the panel and the researchers will submit to the Ministry of Education a final report on what really matters in family literacy in Saskatchewan. If time and money permit, complementary materials may also be developed from the data for various audiences. For example, a writer could be hired to produce for publication a document describing effective literacy programs and evaluation practices for those working to support family literacy. A report on training in family literacy for teachers, literacy facilitators and community organizations may also be developed.

In both phases of the research, the Saskatchewan Family Literacy Research Panel will provide feedback on research questions and processes, act as a sounding board for research data and interpretations and guide the drafting of the reports and complementary documents. The committee will likely meet face to face at least three times in the second phase of the project, as well as communicate with the research team as needed through e-mails, mail and telephone.

It is hoped that a provincial forum for sharing and publicizing the research results will be organized at the end of the project, either through the McDowell Foundation or the Ministry of Education. In addition, workshops on family literacy may be developed for teachers and literacy facilitators, and information on family literacy may be provided on the Internet through the McDowell Foundation, the Ministry of Education or the Saskatchewan Literacy Network. There are numerous opportunities for disseminating and extending the research that could be explored once the findings of the research are known and have been endorsed by the Ministry.

PART II:

THE RESEARCH PLAN FOR PHASE TWO

The researchers in this study will utilize naturalistic inquiry (*studying people in their own environments*) to understand how family literacy programs can contribute to policy-orientated directions in a wide variety of sites. The emphasis will be on assessing the impact of literacy programs on individual learners and communities. Using a multi-site, mixed method research design, the researchers will employ a variety of data-collection tools and analysis strategies to study some of the contextual factors of various literacy programs.

Collaboration with Family Literacy Practitioners

- **Consultation regarding participants, processes and questions**
Consultation with the Saskatchewan Family Literacy Research Panel will provide an opportunity to use *criteria sampling* to select ten family literacy programs in a range of geographic areas to conduct an environmental scan and to hold focus groups and individual interviews. The panel and the research team will collaboratively generate broad questions for the focus groups and in-depth questions for the conversational interviews with funders, administrators, teachers, literacy facilitators and parent participants. Questions will explore the effects of family literacy initiatives on parenting practices, children's school success, family values regarding education, adult participation in educational opportunities and on life transitions; e.g., from school to work.
- **Consultation regarding meaning and interpretation**
Meetings with the research panel will provide opportunities to share the analysis of the research data and receive input as to the meaning of the information shared by the administrators, teachers, literacy facilitators and parent participants. Collaborative discussions between the researchers and the panel will be helpful in generating deeper insights and understandings. Themes will be examined, articulated, re-interpreted, omitted, added or reformulated. Gadamer (1975) describes the method of conversational relationships such as these as "the art of testing" (p. 330). The art of testing consists in the art of questioning—meaning "to lay open, to place in the open" the subject matter of the conversation. Thus, the collaborative activity of discussing and testing the findings of the research study will strengthen the formulation of the underlying themes or meanings that inhere in the text or that still inhere in the phenomenon. The collaborative process can allow the research team to see the limits of their present vision and to transcend those limits.

Site Visits to Family Literacy Programs

- **Building on an environmental scan**
Observation in naturalistic inquiry is comprehensive, continual and holistic. A critical part of observation relates to the idea of contextualization; that is, to understanding the context in which participants are thinking and reacting. Therefore, to conduct an *environmental scan* of ten selected family literacy programs in a range of geographical areas, the team will need to assume the role of a participant observer, as based on Spradley in *Participant Observation*: "The participant observer comes to an organization with two purposes: (1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and (2) to

observe the activities, people and physical aspects of the situation” (Spradley, 1980, p.78). To understand the culture of any family literacy program, the researchers are interested in the physical place, the people involved, and the set of related activities that engage literacy facilitators and parent participants. In the second phase of the research, the research team will “be there,” listening and observing in the physical setting. They will make field note accounts of particular events or depicted activities in order to bring forward in-depth description and relevant dialogue occurring in the programs. Descriptive field notes will describe the situation and the events as they occur, while analytic field notes include the inferences and interpretation that are made about what they observe. These contextual notes will be used to inform the researchers’ assessments of the impact of various family literacy initiatives.

- **Focus group interviews of literacy facilitators, parents, administrators**
A focus group is a variation of an interview, a strategy for obtaining a better understanding of a program by interviewing a purposeful sampled group of people rather than each person individually. It is useful for a general topic and where the purpose is to stimulate talk from multiple perspectives. By creating a dialogical social environment, group participants can stimulate each other to articulate their views or even to become conscious of their own views. Included in the focus group interviews will be individuals who have special or local knowledge about family literacy programs. Focus group participants will be encouraged to think and talk about how family literacy initiatives are affecting them, their families and their communities.
- **Individual interviews**
In any inquiry, the voices of participant literacy providers are important. It is the belief of the research team that experts should not speak for them, own the talk or assess family literacy programs in which their voices are not heard. The team will use conversational interviews with parents, as it is important to know if family literacy programs use family strengths, needs or goals to form the core program by piggy-backing on real-life literacy activities already in place in the home. Or were programs just replicating school activities? In a similar way, the literacy facilitators and administrators will be interviewed to understand how they conceptualize what they are doing and its impact on families.
- **Town hall meetings**
A town hall meeting is an informal public meeting that everybody in a community is invited to attend. At this kind of meeting, community members can voice their opinions and hear from the research team. The town hall meeting would be a useful tool in obtaining community suggestions or feedback on the findings of the study. Does the research accurately and fully articulate the impact of family literacy programs in Saskatchewan?
- **Case studies of family literacy programs**
For more than ten years, family literacy has been a focus of some networks and organizations in Saskatchewan. At least one of these organizations (READ Saskatoon) has been selected for an intensive review of its experiences in supporting family literacy. The review will include the examination of organizational records and interviews with literacy workers and learners to determine how the term “family literacy” has changed or been adapted to meet community needs, what has changed in family literacy practices over the past decade and what family literacy providers predict for our province’s families in the future.

Analysis, Interpretation and Writing

- **Analysis of the field work (data)**

Constant comparison coding of data will be utilized. Analysis is ongoing as the researcher sifts through the data looking for patterns and connections using a constant comparative methodology that refers to a continual process of comparing segments within and across categories. A constant comparison of the data will be achieved with the aid of the Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis computer software program (Atlas.ti, 1997) that uses the researchers' insights and knowledge of the subject area. Atlas.ti is an *open-ended program* that can organize the systematic, inductive coding and grouping of large amounts of primary data. After the transcribed primary documents are entered into the Atlas.ti program, the data bits will be manually coded using identified themes generated by the researcher from a reflective study of the data or by reference to a literature review of the area of study. The coding is used to make intuitive sense out of the masses of data, to cluster related data into groups and to discern connections among these clusters. In the manner described, integration of diverse and multiple fragments of data can be achieved. Global themes and patterns emerge inductively from the data; however, it is the researchers, from a position of academic and intuitive familiarity with the area of study, who select the themes to be coded. The grounded theory that emerges is based on the interviewee's insider view, and the original voice of the interviewee is never abandoned nor compromised, which is critical in cross-cultural research methodologies.

- **Interpretation of the findings**

Interpretation: To understand and present the nature of the reality of what really matters in family literacy programs, the researchers will use a constant comparative frame to ask critical or analytical questions of the data; to generate new questions, insights and puzzles; to discuss with others or ponder alone; to data code in order to describe broad patterns (Cook-Gumperz, 1986), or ask what is to be learned and what needs to be shared. More intensive than the summary of the patterns will be rendering the interpretation of the study that requires the research team to switch gears and think in critical and dialogical ways. Thus, the team will use critical inquiry to interpret the data as it is inductive, generative and constructive using both conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Interpretation involves redesigning old categories, formulating new relationships by combining elements in novel ways, projecting beyond what actually exists, conjuring up improbable connections and metaphors and wondering, "why not" and "what if." The interpretive practice of sense making is both artful and solution orientated. In the project, the extended engagement in the field and the involvement of multiple researchers will provide triangulated data for trustworthy and authentic interpretation. Using family literacy as the interpretative frame, the intent is that the research will work toward social transformation concerning the degree to which literacy can support early and developing learning and have a positive effect on well-being. The study is directed toward policy and social change based on solid data about the impact of family literacy programs and an understanding of what really matters in family literacy in Saskatchewan.

- **Lessons learned for policy-makers, administrators, literacy facilitators, post-secondary training programs and participants**

With two years of data collection, the research team will be mindful that this study assesses the extent to which a family literacy program is developed, implemented as planned and identifies the strengths and the gaps in the programming. The study also provides information with which to anticipate changes for continued program development and implementation. The two-year process of understanding and assessing family literacy will provide information that may be used to shape changes for continued program development and implementation in Saskatchewan. The findings will be useful to each of the stakeholders – policy-makers, administrators, literacy facilitators, post-

secondary training programs and participants – as a retrospective analysis of the program and its relationship to family literacy programming in Saskatchewan.

Writing and Dissemination

- **Dissemination of research findings**

The researchers intend: (1) to document and make explicit the development and implementation of family literacy in Saskatchewan; and (2) to assess the impact of family literacy programs on parenting practices, school success and on life transitions from home to school to work. Due to the interdisciplinary composite of the research team and the stakeholders, this research has a wider dissemination lens. As part of the researchers' professional practice, they are invited to talk to local groups such as those involved with training for parents or family literacy providers or teachers interested in social change, or to meet with government ministers and policy-makers at all levels. The research has a transformative, emancipatory aim as it will generate knowledge that informs school, home, health and program practices as theory and application interface. Results will be disseminated to a range of audiences using appropriate formats (journal articles, conference presentations, academic societies, town hall presentations, parent and community meetings, school, library, and community newsletters and health or school board reports, educational materials nationally and locally). The range of formats (formal and informal) will serve as a conduit for the exchange of technical and theoretical expertise between the university researchers and the community and the exchange of practice-based knowledge between the community and the policy-makers, literacy facilitators, administrators, funders, schools and the post-secondary institutions. The culmination of this knowledge transfer is for solution-oriented outcomes, both originating within and benefiting multiple communities.

- **Deliverables**

Final Report on Phases One and Two of the Research

Document on Effective Literacy Programs and Evaluation Practices

Sustainable Networks for Sharing and Updating Family Literacy Information – in progress

Dissemination through journal publications, books, articles, town hall meetings, community newsletters – in progress

PART III: TIMELINES AND BUDGET FOR PHASE TWO

Tentative Timelines

May 2009	Funding for Phase Two of the project is in place
Spring – Summer 2009	Training of researchers Setting up focus groups Development of focus group questions First Advisory Committee meeting
September 2009	Communication with literacy stakeholders about the focus groups Setting up the focus groups
October – November 2009	Ten focus group meetings
December 2009 – January 2010	Data analysis and interpretation
February 2010	Second Advisory Committee meeting Writing year two research report
March 2010	Review of research report Planning for research dissemination Hiring of writer for resource documents Third Advisory Committee meeting Comprehensive research report to Ministry of Education
April – May 2010	Writing and field-testing of resource document
July 2010	Submission of resource document to Ministry of Education

Proposed Budget

Personnel		\$23,500
Researchers (university graduate students)	512 x \$16/hour = \$8,192 (Training: 2 7-hour days x 2 = 28 hrs Planning: 12 mtgs x 2 hrs x 2 = 48 hrs Panel Mtgs: 3 mtgs x 6 hrs x 2 = 36 hrs Focus Groups: 10 grps x 5 hrs x 2 = 100 hrs Group Notes/Summaries: 10 grps x 3 hrs x 2 = 60 hrs Data Analysis: 3 wks = 120 hrs Report Writing: 3 wks = 120 hrs)	\$8,500
Transcribers	400 hours x \$20/hour	\$8,000
Writer of Resource Document		\$7,000
Advisory Committee		\$10,500
Honoraria & Sub Costs	8 people x \$220 per day x 3 meetings (\$5,280)	\$5,500
Travel Expenses	40¢/km x 500 km x 5 people x 3 mtgs = \$3,000 3 meals x \$15 x 3 mtgs = \$135 3 hotels x \$110 x 3 mtgs = \$990	\$4,500
Lunch Costs	10 people x \$15 x 3 mtgs	\$500
Focus Groups/Field Visits		\$14,200
Participant Expenses	Travel Expenses: \$50 gas x 10 people x 10 mtgs = \$5,000 Honoraria: \$20 x 10 people x 10 mtgs = \$2,000	\$7000
Researcher Expenses	\$300 kilometerage x 8 out-of-town groups = \$2,400 \$150/day travel costs x 2 x 5 groups = \$1,500	\$4,000
Lunches	\$20 x 12 people x 10 mtgs	\$2,500
Meeting Rooms (if not in town or available in-kind)	\$140 x 5 meetings	\$700
Administration		\$4,600
Materials		\$150
Copying		\$250
Secretarial services		\$500
Desktopping (50 hours)		\$1,060
Project Coordinator		\$2,500
In-Kind Contributions		\$0
Research Expertise, Software & Equipment	From the University of Saskatchewan	
Meeting Rooms	Available from the STF and U of S, possibly available outside Saskatoon through literacy stakeholders	
Communications	Facilitated by the McDowell Foundation, researchers, Advisory Committee and literacy stakeholders	
Travel Vehicles for Researchers	From the research team	
TOTAL COST OF YEAR TWO		\$52,800
TOTAL PROJECT COST	Project Development Grant: \$10,000 Phase 1 Research Grant: \$30,000 Phase 2 Research Grant: \$52,800	\$92,800

Appendix 1: Feedback from the Stakeholders' Forum

Early and Family Literacy Stakeholders' Forum

STF Building, Saskatoon

February 5, 2007

The Forum brought together 25 individuals with a variety of backgrounds and a shared interest in early and family literacy. Feedback was collected from small group discussions that focused on the following questions:

- How do we define early and family literacy?
- What works well in providing programs and supports for early and family literacy?
- How do we know what is working?
- Who has access to information about support and programs that are working?
- What gaps are there in the programs and supports for early and family literacy?

The feedback received in response to these questions was analyzed and summarized for use by a research panel in developing a proposal for research into what really matters in early and family literacy. The panel, which consists largely of individuals who attended the Forum and subsequently volunteered to assist in developing the research, will be preparing the proposal for submission to the Saskatchewan Literacy Commission at the end of March.

Forum participants were also asked to identify programs and contacts in early and family literacy in Saskatchewan. The list they generated will be used in developing further the scope and focus of proposed research in this area.

Summary of Feedback

What is family literacy?

- Families are at the centre of literacy learning.
 - Family literacy events occur as families go about the routines in their everyday life and in their cultural practices.
 - Family literacy practices are multiple. There are many families and many literacies.
 - Family literacy begins with oral language and extends beyond.
 - Family literacy is intergenerational; all family members participate in literacy events as learning is reciprocal.
 - Family literacy is social as in the interaction and communication between and amongst family members in different literacy contexts.
 - Family literacy is a broad definition as it expands beyond reading and writing to include visual representation and other literacies.
 - Family literacy is not the same in all cultures; some families use oral language as in storytelling. It is important to recognize and honour the diversity.
 - Within families, literacy is focused on teaching and learning; in families, there are different levels of learning.

- Multiple literacies continually occur and develop in families and the community.
 - Literacy extends beyond to reading and writing in numeracy, computer and literacy.
 - Literacy is dynamic and changing as the society also changes.

What is early literacy?

- Early literacy is developmental and different for each child.
 - Early literacy starts when children develop experiential and background knowledge before they begin reading and writing.
 - Early literacy begins at birth – birth to age 8.
 - Early literacy supports are essential for parents and family.
 - The early literacy model provides supports for parents and families, including prevention and intervention.
 - Early literacy is unique for every child; there are different responses and needs at different ages.

What works well in programs and supports for early and family literacy?

- A comprehensive, coherent and sustainable system provides the foundation for early and family literacy.
 - The “silos” formed by the institutions involved in early and family literacy are broken down.
 - Provincial forums exist that bring people together.
 - Work done by literacy organizations and networks is shared and built on.
 - Strong, authentic partnerships in early and family literacy exist between K-12 schools and their communities.
 - Roles are defined and bridges built (school councils, principals, parents, community school coordinators, libraries, etc.).
 - School principals are key leaders in early and family literacy.
 - There is reciprocity and shared expertise between schools and community agencies.
 - Schools are transparent and include literacy stakeholders in developing, delivering and evaluating early and family literacy.
 - Community-based organizations and programs play an important role by filling the gaps between the institutions involved in literacy.
 - There is interagency cooperation, communication and coordination, both formal and informal.
 - Sustained, adequate funding is provided to all parts of the early and family literacy system.
 - Training is available for workers, volunteers and family members involved in early and family literacy.
 - Needed areas of training are identified.
 - Expertise in early and family literacy is built within schools.
 - Literacy programs provide people with an ongoing window of opportunity to extend their literacy.
 - Attention to literacy begins with infants and toddlers to build foundational skills, such as the ability to interact or handle books.
- Schools and others support parent involvement in children’s literacy beyond the early years.
- Early and family literacy programs and supports are diverse, flexible and relevant.

- Programs are developed at the grassroots to meet the varying needs and circumstances of learners and to develop the capacity of learners to meet their own needs.
 - Broad definition of community involvement in early and family literacy with parents recognized as key leaders.
- Schools and communities provide sustained leadership and commitment for early and family literacy.
 - Literacy as a priority.
- Outreach and breaking down barriers is an important part of early and family literacy.
 - Continual invitation and openness to learners.
 - Understanding that to reach one individual is a success.
- Participation in literacy programs is supported by attention to learners' practical needs such as:
 - Transportation
 - Babysitting
 - Flexible scheduling
 - Food
 - Take-aways (e.g., books)
- Programs are flexible so that learners may move in and out of them.
- Early and family literacy is characterized by high quality programming:
 - Interactive, engaging, fun
 - Activities go beyond the teacher to involve the family
 - Theme-based learning that is open-ended and strengths-based
 - Portfolios that build confidence
 - Modelling of strategies for parents (e.g., story reading)
 - Connection of learners with resources
 - Recognition and accommodation of cultural differences
- Early and family literacy programs are provided in a friendly, welcoming environment.
 - Programs with inviting names.
- Early and family literacy is grounded in interpersonal relationships characterized by trust and commitment.
 - A shared understanding of literacy allows learners to feel respected and positive in extending their skills.
 - Dispel myths and broaden understanding of literacy.
 - Educate the business community (e.g., on the impact of tests).
 - Assist learners in understanding both their strengths and their needs.
 - Parents feel involved, validated and empowered with respect to their role in early and family literacy.
 - Workers and volunteers involved in early and family literacy are dedicated to the cause and care about the learners.
 - Cultural differences are recognized and respected.

How do we know programs in early and family literacy are working?

- There is observable impact on the individuals participating.
 - Increased involvement in and strategies used in home literacy practices.
 - Change in types of home literacy practices.
 - More interactive.
 - More involvement in community.
 - Individuals access additional opportunities that support literacy.

- There is an increase in the number of participants and programs.
 - Broad participation including parents, extended family, community members not connected to schools.
 - Increased demands for programs and services.
 - Increased interest and financial support for programs.
- There is networking between programs and participants.
 - Links between school and community programs in literacy.
 - Regional networks established.
- Broad understanding of literacy is developed.
 - All strands of literacy are addressed – reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, representing, informational technology, numeracy, etc.
- There are formal and informal assessments of skill development.
 - Testing.
 - Taping.
 - Number of books read.

Who has access to information about early and family literacy?

- There are organizations that disseminate information about family literacy programs.
 - Saskatchewan Literacy Network:
 - Through ongoing updates on e-bulletin
 - Through personal contacts
 - Through newsletters
 - Saskatchewan Literacy Commission:
 - Promotes literacy
 - Partners with groups
 - Disseminates information
 - Community schools
 - Local and regional libraries are centres for dropping off/picking up materials.
 - Outreach is part of all family literacy programs.
 - Amalgamation has supported dissemination of information.
 - School committee representatives share information.
- Families get information about forthcoming family literacy programs or events through the public domain.
 - Word-of mouth.
 - Brochures.
 - Publications.
 - Community network.
 - Media support for special events.
 - Self-referrals.
- Families get professional information about family literacy services such as speech and language in multiple ways.
 - Partnerships between agencies/regional network.
 - Saskatchewan Literacy Network.
 - Ongoing updates.
 - Personal contacts.

- Referrals for special programs.

What gaps are there in Saskatchewan's programs and supports for early and family literacy?

- Sustained funding is needed for early and family literacy.
 - Current funding is piecemeal and short-term, focusing on sequential, one-time grants to programs.
 - Funding uncertainty makes program planning tentative.
 - Uncertain funding requires a contractual approach to staffing that can increase turnovers.
 - Funding problems affecting salaries and working conditions may underlie the “feminization” of the literacy sector.
 - School programs increase the demands on community-based programs.
 - First Nations schools are excluded from funding.
 - Partnerships need to be established that will provide more resources for early and family literacy.
- A coordinated, comprehensive vision is needed of early and family literacy in Saskatchewan.
 - Policy is needed to align the philosophy of early and family literacy in schools and community-based agencies.
 - A system is needed that consolidates, integrates and coordinates the literacy efforts of government, schools, community-based agencies and First Nations.
 - Recognition that community-based agencies are the mortar holding the system together.
 - Development of connections so information gets out, comes back and is shared.
 - Appropriate linkages with and within government (e.g., the Department of Community Resources needs to be part of discussions about family literacy).
 - Authentic partnerships between literacy-focused agencies.
 - Ways are needed to identify literacy needs in each community.
 - Community literacy committees.
 - School councils (parents).
 - The vision needs to be supported with adequate funding and sustained leadership.
- K-12 schools need to play a strong role in early and family literacy.
 - The vision of School^{PLUS} embeds schools in a system of supports for children and families.
 - Time is not available for schools to address the need for home/family reading programs.
 - Administrators may have no interest in early and family literacy or be overly directive in this area.
 - Teachers vary in their knowledge and capacities with respect to early and family literacy; strategies are underutilized.
 - Schools seldom use languages other than English and French.
 - Testing of educational outcomes in schools does not further early and family literacy.
- Effective communication is needed to further early and family literacy for all.
 - Language should be plain, accessible to everyone, inviting and attractive, and oriented towards the needs of all groups.
 - The word “literacy” may not be parent friendly, but it needs to be in the title of granting agencies.

- Programs, funding and training are needed to meet the needs of the following:
 - Middle years students, especially boys.
 - Rural areas and small communities not linked to the literacy network.
- Training in early and family literacy needs to be provided to the following:
 - Daycares, home-based child care providers and preschools that are not aware of and using “best literacy practices.”
 - Foster families and others who deal with “hard to reach” children.
 - Continually changing literacy workers and volunteers.
- Relationships with First Nations and immigrant groups need to be developed in early and family literacy.
 - The development of trust is important as a basis for involvement.
 - Understanding needs to be developed of how to put in place protocols and partnerships for working with First Nations on literacy issues.
 - It would be helpful to identify programs that are working with First Nations.
- Public education is needed with respect to early and family literacy.
 - Attitudes towards literacy are not aligned with current definitions and approaches.
 - Children need quality time to become literate as opposed to moments in quantity of time.
 - For many children, learning has become passive rather than experiential due to the influence of technologies that are heavily marketed (e.g., television, computers, videos, electronic games and educational programs such as Baby Einstein).

Appendix 2:

Some Questions Identified by the Research Panel

- How do we get comprehensive, inclusive, sustainable and consistent programming throughout the province?
- How do all parents access information on family literacy? How is the health sector a connector?
- What is involved in family literacy – inventory of programs, resources, personnel and funding?
- How do successful programs publicize and share what they're doing?
- How do we evaluate family literacy programs and practices? What do we evaluate? What is the methodology and the audience?
- How does the public perceive family literacy? Who defines family literacy?
- How do we develop a common/plain language?
- How do we respond to family needs in a positive, supportive way?
- How long does it take to make an impact upon family literacy practices? What is the effect of short-term practices?
- How do we understand family literacy and behaviours?