

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 literacy 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, representing 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 honor 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 does also.

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 on-going 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 on-going 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
 - On-going 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).