# PARENTS – THE FIRST TEACHERS: SUPPORTING FAMILIES IN EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

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by

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A paper folio submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

Faculty of Education

Memorial University of Newfoundland

January 2005

St. John's                                        Newfoundland

# Abstract

In this paper folio early literacy development is discussed and support for families as first teachers of literacy learning is examined. In the first paper, theories of early childhood development, early language acquisition, and early literacy development are presented, as well as relevant, recent findings from neuroscience. The roles that families play in supporting children's early literacy development are discussed. The second paper traces the emergence of the family literacy movement and philosophical dissension within the field is examined. A number of family literacy programs, designed to support early literacy development within families, are analyzed. In the third paper, a description of early literacy/family literacy programs that currently exist in Newfoundland and Labrador are presented. Those organizations/agencies responsible for early literacy/family literacy within the Province are identified and their roles discussed. This paper concludes with suggested guidelines for the advancement of early literacy/family literacy in Newfoundland and Labrador.

*Family literacy is the beginning of lifelong literacy. It is the ground zero against which children measure everything else in their lives. Working with families is the most effective way of raising literacy levels. (*Mary Gordon, 2000)

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. William Fagan, for his support and guidance throughout my work on this paper folio. His knowledge and expertise in the field of early literacy/family literacy has contributed to the broadening of my perspective.

I am especially grateful to my family – my husband Claude and my children, Catherine and James - for their encouragement, understanding, and support, not only during my preparation of this paper folio, but throughout my pursuit of the Master of Education Degree.

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## General Introduction

The focus of this paper folio is early literacy development, from birth to formal school entry, within the context of the preschools child's most significant social and learning environment, the family. Support for families as first teachers of literacy is examined through international, national, and local programs and initiatives.

Paper One examines theories of early childhood development, early language acquisition, and early literacy development. It discusses the findings from brain research which have particular implications for the early years of development. Literacy practices and experiences can only be fully understood from their theoretical knowledge and underpinnings. The roles that families play in supporting children's early literacy development are discussed and literacy experiences within the home environment, which are believed to contribute to early literacy acquisition, are presented.

In order to fully understand family literacy it is necessary to examine the range of family literacy programs that are in use today. Paper Two provides a brief history of early childhood intervention and the emergence of the family literacy movement. Various definitions of family literacy are presented and philosophical dissension, within the field of family literacy, is discussed. A number of family literacy programs are analyzed according to a set of criteria and, as an example, three of the programs are explored in-depth to determine their overall effectiveness in supporting early literacy development within families.

A key interest of the author in doing this paper folio is to understand the current scene in Newfoundland and Labrador with respect to family literacy and perhaps to suggest some direction in that regard. Paper Three begins with a brief rationale for supporting literacy development in the early years, incorporating many of the ideas brought forth in the previous two papers. A description of early literacy/family literacy programs that currently exist in Newfoundland and Labrador are presented. Organizations and agencies which are responsible for early literacy/family literacy, within the Province, are identified and their roles in setting policy and impacting the scene are discussed. This paper concludes with suggested guidelines for the advancement of early literacy/family literacy in Newfoundland and Labrador.

As a teacher in the public school system, with a keen interest and experience in early literacy/family literacy, I am very interested in the future direction of early literacy/family literacy in this province.

Readers will note there is a style shift in the use of "person" in authoring the papers of this folio. Papers One and Two are based on outside sources and entail third person use. For Paper Three, which examines the author's own provincial context, the author uses first person style.

# Early Literacy Development: The Importance of the Early Years and The Role of Families in Fostering Early Literacy Acquisition

## Introduction

This paper examines theories of early childhood development, early language acquisition, and early literacy development. It discusses the findings from brain research which have particular implications for the early years of development. The roles that families play in supporting children's early literacy development are discussed, and literacy experiences within the home environment, which are believed to contribute to early literacy acquisition, are presented.

## A Brief History of Perceptions of Early Childhood

Trawick-Smith (1997) presents a history of child study from a Western perspective beginning with the Middle Ages when there was little recognition of childhood. Children up to the ages of 6-7 were considered 'infants.' Often deemed non-persons, they were considered to have little value.

It is Trawick-Smiths (1997) view that during the Renaissance period views on childhood began to change as children were gradually viewed as distinctly different human beings, although they were considered innately sinister, resulting in harsh treatment and training. This view persisted throughout the eighteenth century; however, the treatment of children changed for the better in Western society during the nineteenth

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and twentieth centuries with an emphasis on the development of the socialization of children. The first half of the twentieth century marked the start of caring, protection, and education for children, but it would be the late twentieth century before concern for the development of the whole child - the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual needs - came to the forefront (Trawick-Smith, 1997). Historian deMause (1974) predicted this to be a "helping" period in Western society which would lead adults to the recognition of children's needs and the importance of nurturing and guidance during early development. However, Trawick-Smith contends that, while recognition of the importance of the early years has gained prominence since this prediction, currently, support for all children and their families in modern Western society is far from realized.

## Theoretical Perspectives of Child Development

Given the very recent interest in early childhood, it should come as no surprise that the study of early childhood development is a relatively new field of inquiry, with interest in the early years of development intensifying towards the end of the twentieth century and continuing to this day (Brooks-Gunn, Fuligni & Berlin, 2003). Theories of child development incorporate several specific sets of beliefs about how children grow and develop. The early theories of child development centered around debates of nature versus nurture. Burton L. White, in his book *The First Three Years of Life* (1975), traces the nature-nurture controversy to the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time a child's "nature" was considered to be brought into the world with him. During the second and third decades of that century people began to consider the importance of early

experiences, especially those of the first five years of life. During the 1930s, opponents of such ideas, with Gesell among its leaders, conducted research to demonstrate that there were limits to what early learning and early teaching could achieve for a child (White, 1975). The Maturationist Theory maintains that human traits are determined first and foremost by genetics. Children mature as they age and the environment plays only a minor role in their development. Parents and teachers are considered far less important than genetics (Trawick-Smith, 1997).

In contrast to the Maturational Theory, the Behaviorist Theory, which dominated much of the nineteenth and twentieth century psychology and was based on the study of animal behavior and laboratory experiments, asserts that human learning is shaped and controlled from outside the learner through a process of reinforcement (Whitehead, 1997). Behavioral scientists who support this view believe that all that children are and will become, is acquired from experience. Children are born with "blank" minds ready to be gradually filled by their environmental influences. This speaks to the significant nurturing role of adults in a child's life. Behaviorists argue that genetics and maturation are unimportant in human development and that all learning is ultimately perceptible behavior (Trawick-Smith).

The Cognitive-Developmental Theory, which recognized the influences of nature-nurture, began to impact the study of child development during the 1950s and 1960s (White, 1975). The most influential of the cognitive-developmentalists, Jean Piaget, asserted that mental growth was the most important element in child development

and that all aspects of human life are impacted by thinking and language. He believed

that knowledge is constructed via the actions of the learner on the environment, and that,

by way of the processes of assimilation and accommodation, humans advance through

stages of cognitive development (Trawick-Smith, 1997). Piaget's view of development as

endogenous maintains that cognitive development is universal in its content, variant only

in its rate, and follows a linear progression towards a single better form (Meadows,

1996). Piaget concluded that children were learning all the time, in their own way, as

they act upon their environment through a natural process of adaptation (Smith, 1988).

Another cognitive-developmental theorist, Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), has

become widely recognized in recent years for his Social Interactionist Theory of child

development. Vygotsky asserts that all thought occurs first in social interaction and only

gradually becomes intrapsychological. Vygotsky's theory of "basic learning" purports

that children learn higher mental functions by internalizing social relationships. This

theory attributes great significance to the role of language and to the contributions of

social interaction for learning (Trawick-Smith). The theory suggests that cognitive

processes are shared between people within a culture -  from the more sophisticated

(adults and older children) to the less sophisticated (younger children). The role of social

communication in cognitive development is one of facilitating children's learning within

their *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*. This fundamental principle of Vygotsky's

theory exemplifies the realm of  children's ability to achieve with some assistance from a

competent other, often referred to as scaffolding (Bruner, 1986),  in order to advance in

their learning (Saracho & Spodek, 2002). Vygotsky's view of development as exogenous positions adult-child interactions at its focus with cognitive abilities advanced predominately by social phenomenon ( Meadows, 1996).

The current focus on the contexts in which children are developing has led to developmental theories that specify the influence of these settings (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2003). Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) is among proponents of the Ecological Systems Theory of child development which emphasizes the settings and institutions that influence growth and development. Bronfenbrenner criticizes theories of child development which focus only on individual growth and behavior, maintaining that a comprehensive evaluation of human development must include the layers of ecological systems which interact with each other to influence child development. While it is the microsystem, which includes the family, the community and other factors in the immediate environment, which directly impact on child development, society and culture as a whole are also extremely influential. It has been suggested that the ecological systems theory has contributed to defining social issues and directing social policy (Trawick-Smith, 1997).

All of these learning theories have contributed to our understanding of child development; however Morrow (1997) maintains that it is Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development and Vygotsky's Social Interactionist Theory of Intellectual Development which have had the greatest impact on the field of early childhood education. Saracho and Spodek (2002) state that it is Vygotsky's theory which has become widely

recognized by western educators for its particular implications for the development of language and literacy through family interaction and support.

## Brain Research and the Early Years

Underlying all learning, whether oral language or literacy, is the brain (McCain & Mustard, 1999).The pervasive dissemination of brain research and its implications for early childhood education is a recent phenomenon. Bruer (1999) points to the 1980s, when parents and the general public were first introduced to the "new" brain science through popular literature. Jerome Kagan, in his 1985 article "The Infant: Ready and Able to Learn," featured in *Children Today* (cited in Bruer, 1999), explained the process of synapse growth and highlighted the critical importance for early sensory stimulation for babies following birth. The mention of the brain's rapid growth early in life and the effects of enriched environments, from studies of brain development in rats, was reported as providing parents with evidence that babies brains develop with use. Although much of what Kagan presented in this article continues to be represented in current brain and infancy literature, Bruer maintains that this article, unlike many of today, was not alarmist, in fact it reassured parents that should a child's experiences be less than optimal there was no need to worry as the resiliency of children and their brains would make up for this.

In the 1990s, amid a growing concern for the health, well-being, and education of children, wide-spread media coverage of conferences devoted to the preliminary findings of brain research promoted the alleged implications of these studies for child-rearing. Early intervention was trumpeted as critical to the optimal development of young children (Zigler, Finn-Stevenson & Hall, 2002).

Brain research throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century has added to our understanding of the workings of the human brain. Neuroscience discoveries are contributing to a better understanding of how children acquire the ability to think, understand, and use language. We now know that that the brain develops rapidly from conception to the third year of life at a rate unmatched by any other developmental period. In their synthesis of early brain development, Zigler et al. explain that the billions of brain cells that make up an adult brain are already present at birth and that the forming and strengthening of the synapses, the vital connections between the neurons that send information, are most active during the first few years of life. Genetically, a large number of these connections exist in the nervous system and are maintained and strengthened through environmental experience. Neuroscience research purports a complex interaction of genes and the environment in the development of the brain.

Bruer (1999) states that the popular literature on the brain and early child development combines the information on the critical period of synapse formation and enriched environments with increased stimulation, during the first three years of life, as having the greatest impact on brain development. For parents and policymakers this

suggests a "unique, biologically delimited window of opportunity, during which the right experiences and early childhood programs can help children build better brains" (Bruer, 1999, p.12). This interpretation of the critical period seems to suggest that the brain learns best only during the early years of life. However, several neuroscientists (for example, Huttenlocher,1994; Nelson & Bloom, 1997; Scheibel, 1997, as cited in Bruer, 1999) have questioned this simplistic view of the brain.

The brain-based advice offered to parents, often accused of being based on oversimplification and misinterpretation of brain research, has been described as vague and contradictory. Bruer argues that parents have not been given enough specific advice of which to act upon; but rather the message disseminated is that everything matters in the early years. The voluminous and somewhat contradictory nature of the information has caused parents to be, as Berk (2001) put it, "baffled and bewildered." Different sources of information advise different things. For example, some suggest that while optimal stimulation is good, too much stimulation might be bad, leaving parents unsure as to what to do. Parents were left wondering whether their efforts to provide their children with a "leg up" was helping or hurting development (Zigler et al., 2002). While the information presented to parents has failed to offer a clear, consistent approach to effective child rearing, there is one point on which the literature is unanimous: the critical importance of getting development off to a good start during the preschool years (Berk, 2001).

Media coverage of brain studies, while sometimes exaggerating claims, has served to heighten awareness of the early years of life and have caused a shift in how parents perceive early development and their role in fostering it. As well, it has had a particular impact on the policy arena regarding young children and their families. While there are those who criticize interventions based on oversimplified and misinterpreted findings (for example, Bruer, 1999), in some cases, overstatements of research findings have actually contributed to the development of programs for children and families deemed at risk (Grimes, 1998, as cited in Zigler et al., 2002).

Zigler et al., believe that, as the "controversial" dust is settling around the contributions of brain research for child development, the following outcomes have emerged: (1) that brain studies to date have confirmed what social science research has already implied: that a young child's experience of the world impacts on early and continuing development, (2) that parents play a significant role in their child's development and (3) that while the early years are critical, development and learning continues throughout life. It is in this light that brain research integrates into what Zigler et al., refers to as the "canon" of child study. Related specifically to this paper, the first two outcomes support current theories and perspectives on early literacy development.

Brain research, while still in its infancy, is adding to our understanding of child development. It is one more piece of the puzzle of how children develop and why they behave as they do. Berk (2001) asserts that our "expanding knowledge base on brain development and children's learning reveals that a genetically influenced roadmap for

brain growth and a developmentally appropriate environment go hand in hand; the impact of each depends on the other" (p. 25).

## Early Language Acquisition

Just as the theories of child development changed since the 1950s, so too did the explanations of early language acquisition. Many developmental theories have endeavored to elucidate language acquisition including Behaviorist, Nativist, Cognitive Development, Social Interactionist and most recently, Constructivist.

The Behaviorists purport an associationist model of language learning which submits that children are passive receivers of language and that, through positive reinforcement of imitative behavior, they are guided toward an adult model (Smith, 1998). The behaviorist view of language acquisition was challenged by American linguist and philosopher, Noam Chomsky (1965, as cited in Smith, 1998). His studies revealed the extraordinary things that children can do with language at a very early stage. Chomsky believed that the process of language development was more than pure imitation. His asserted that language acquisition during childhood was a matter of gaining facility with the rules that control language . Children are not directly taught to use these rules, rather this ability matures automatically with exposure to the language environment. Considerable research resulted from Chomsky's theory (Bar-Adon, Leopold, & Werner 1971; Braine, 1963; Brown & Bellugi, 1964; McNeill, 1971; Smith

& Miller 1966). Whitehead (1997) contends that Chomsky's discoveries prompted researchers to listen carefully to young children to consider of the complexity of their language.

The Nativists' approach to language acquisition, in attempting to answer questions about how infants learn such a complex task, returned to earlier theories which proposed the existence of innate, and therefore, universal features of the human mind. This view, which suggests that children are pre-programmed to learn a language, has been criticized because of its propensity to regard "language and the mind in a vacuum, divorced somewhat from significant human relationships and social settings, and from all other kinds of learning with which babies are actively involved" (Whitehead,  p. 44).

The Cognitive Development theory asserts that language development is part of general cognitive development. This view holds that at birth the human mind is bestowed with certain predefining dispositions and that language acquisition must "wait" for these sensori-motor thinking developments and build on them. This theory posits that children are active, rule-oriented beings who acquire much of their language on their own initiative through exposure to various activities in their environment (Smith, 1998).

The Social Interactionist theory, with its context-specific approach to cognition, views language as a "socioculturally provided tool for the construction of thought" (Smith, p.18) . Early in life children begin to use language as a tool to guide their learning.  From a sociological perspective language development is influenced by the environment through exposure to appropriate demonstrations of language use by adults

and older children. Bruner (1983, cited in Whitehead, 1997) contends that "the infant's language-learning capacities could not function without the aid given by an adult, who provides a Language Acquisition Support System and scaffolds the child's entry into the language" ( p 19).

The Constructivist approach, which manifests a more contemporary perspective of language acquisition, characterizes children as creators of language on the basis of an innate set of concepts. Emerging from the work of Piaget and Vygotsky, and supported by various language development studies (Brown, Cazden & Bellugi-Klima, 1968; Halliday, 1975), language is viewed as an active and social process whereby children construct or reconstruct language as they learn. Morrow (1997) believes that the implications of a constructivist approach to language acquisition are especially important for early literacy development. This process of acquiring language is continuous and interactive, occurring in social settings where the child is interacting with others.

Morrow states that it is the newer learning theories of Piaget and Vygotsky that have come to be recognized for their ideas concerning early language acquisition. In particular it was Vygotsky who regarded language as the major bridge between our social and mental worlds; asserting that language acquisition is the "most significant milestone in children's cognitive development" (Beak, 2001 p.33).

The acquisition of language is now widely accepted as fundamental for literacy development. Morrow asserts that language development is one of the first steps towards becoming literate. She states that a child's "main resource for their literacy learning is

their knowledge of ways to symbolize their experiences and to communicate through those symbols in pre- and postspeech interactions" (p 263). She explains that it is in the learning to communicate that literacy development commences. Snow, Tabors and Dickinson (2001), in their discussion of the critical connections that occur during the early years of life, claim that increasingly early literacy research, such as their Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development (1987), demonstrates a reciprocal relationship between language development and early literacy development and the significance of the home in fostering these.

## Early Literacy Development

During the first half of the twentieth century there was little consideration given to the relationship between language development and early literacy development and the significance of the home in fostering children's literacy development before school entry. Literacy learning began with formal reading instruction in first grade. While many educators waited for children to be ready to read, believing that natural maturation was a precursor of literacy, others advocated providing preschool and kindergarten children with structured experiences that would prepare them for learning to read. The Reading Readiness Model focused instruction on a set of skills identified as prerequisite for reading. Morrow (1997) renders that this model has been criticized because of (1) the assumption that one prepares for literacy by acquiring a set of prescribed skills, (2) the implication that all children are at a fairly similar level of cognitive development based

on their chronological age, and (3) the disregard for the literacy information and experiences that a child may already possess.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, studies investigating how children learn oral language began to challenge the concept of reading readiness. This research determined that children acquire language through their active role in constructing language. Findings from this research led researchers to investigate the acquisition of reading and writing. It was believed that because reading and writing involve the use of language, acquisition of these processes would be similar to those employed in the acquisition of oral language (Morrow, 1997).

Although Marie Clay (1966) is credited with first using the term *emergent literacy* in her doctoral dissertation to describe the evolving literacy knowledge of young children (Tease & Sulzby, 1986), it would be more than twenty years later before this appellation would be widely used and accepted (Lancy, 1994). It was not until the 1980s that reading theory recognized the complexity of the reading process as a constructive act and attention turned to the origin of the skills employed. This shift in attention led to the (re) discovery of the Emergent Literacy Paradigm, the assemblage of behaviors involving oral language and print that appear during the preschool years. Evidence of these behaviors indicates that, prior to formal literacy instruction, children are creating literacy-related understandings (Dickinson, 1994).

The term emergent literacy is used to characterize the beginning of reading and writing behavior, and describes what young children come to know about literacy and

how they come to know about it, in the preschool years (Miller, 1996). Sulzby & Teale (1991) posit that reading and writing develop concurrently and interrelatedly in young children, nurtured by experiences that promote meaningful interaction with oral and written language. This view of literacy development suggests that reading and writing are the process of becoming and that these skills gradually emerge without formal teaching in the pre-school years (Teale and Sulzby, 1986). Children are considered emergent readers and writers until they reach the stage of conventional reading and writing.

Morrow (1997), in her discussion of emergent literacy, contends that babies begin to acquire information about literacy from the moment of birth and that, through exposure to a wide variety of experiences in the everyday social contexts, such as the home and community, they are continuously building on their knowledge of oral language, reading, and writing. Similarly, Teale and Sulzby (1989) believe that young children actively construct their knowledge of print from a combination of independent explorations of written language, interactions with literate persons, and observations of those participating in literacy activities.

Dickinson (1994) claims that, while early childhood has long been recognized as an important formative period, it is the emergent literacy research which has legitimized the importance of early childhood for literacy development.

In the 1990s, following on the emergent literacy paradigm, and amid a growing research focus on the nature of literacy outside of schooling, sociocultural theories of literacy learning emerged; the recognition that "young children develop a wealth of

knowledge and understanding about literacy from an early age through participation in social and cultural events" (Barratt-Pugh, 2000, p. 20). By participating in literacy activities children learn about the cultural norms of the family and community and, through this process of enculturation, begin to make sense of the world around them. Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman & Hemphill (1991) state that, "Literacy is not just a cognitive achievement on the part of the child; it is also participation in culturally defined structures of knowledge and communication … becoming literate means achieving membership in a culture" (p.175). McNaughton (1995) believes that "families socialize children into their literacy practices, which reflect and build social and cultural identities" (p. 33).

As the sociocultural view of literacy evolved and scholars began to rethink the notion of literacy competencies coming from within the child, the term "emergent literacy" began to be replaced by "early literacy" (New, 2001).

Gillen and Hall (2003), in their discussion of the concept of "early childhood literacy", present several characteristics of this new perspective, including the following:

It is a concept that allows early childhood to be seen as a state in which people use literacy as it is appropriate, meaningful, and useful to them, rather than a stage on a path to some future literate state. It is not about emergence or becoming literate, it is about being literate; and it allows the literacy practices and product of early childhood to be acknowledged as valid in their own right, rather than perceived as inadequate manifestations of adult literacy. It is a concept that allows

early literacy to move way beyond the limitations and restrictions of schooling and extend into all domains of the lives of people in early childhood. (p. 10)

Neuman and Roskos (1998) submit that this new perspective acknowledges that literacy begins at birth, is ongoing, and is influenced by the surrounding sociocultural context.

## The Role of Families in Early Literacy Development

Prisca Martens (1998), in writing about lessons learned from the study of her daughter's literacy development, stated that, "One lesson I learned is the important role of the home and family in children's literacy learning. I began to appreciate that children begin learning literacy at birth through the countless authentic literacy events they observe and participate in daily within the context of their families and communities" (p. 53).

Prior to the 1980s there was little attention given to research on literacy in terms of the composition and interactions of families. Most of the studies up to this point investigated factors affecting early language development within the home (Cairney, 2003). There were investigations of homes in which children learned to read prior to school entry (Durkin, 1966; Holdaway, 1979; Ninio & Bruner, 1978), yet Cairney suggests that these studies were more of interest for their contribution to the understanding of children's early literacy learning at school, rather than at home.

However, Holdaway (1979), identified a common feature, in what he called the "background" of these early readers, "the presence of a certain type of supportive and emulative adult or peer who answers questions directly and readily without interfering with what the child is trying to do" (p. 38).

In the 1980s, as the emergent literacy perspective contributed to an understanding of the critical role that early literacy experiences play in children's school literacy learning, and as learning perspectives such as constructivist, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural gained in prominence, the role that families play in early literacy development began to be studied (Cairney, 2003).

Early studies of early literacy learning in homes focused on structural variables such as family income and parents' level of education ( Sulzby & Teale, 1991). However, the findings from these studies did not explain how these factors directly affect children's literacy development nor did they explicate the processes involved in literacy acquisition. More recent studies investigating literacy lives from the inside (Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) focused on specifying the process variables - attitudes and actions that appear to influence early literacy development.

Denny Taylor is credited with first using the term "family literacy" to describe the nature of literacy practices within homes. Taylor, through her investigations, discovered "that the most significant mode of transmitting literacy styles and values occurs indirectly, at the very margins of awareness through the continuously diffuse use of written language in the ongoing life of the family" (Leichter, 1974, cited in Taylor,

1983, p. 7). Taylor's work provided detailed insights into the nature of family practices within homes and contributed to an understanding of the ways that children learn to read and write through their everyday experiences in family life (Cairney, 2003).

Leichter (1982), through her intensive studies of families in their natural environment, also discovered that much of the learning that takes place in the home occurs on a moment-to-moment basis, embedded in everyday activities. She proposed three "climates" which provide contexts for literacy learning in the home: (1) the "physical climate" would see the presence of print materials and written language in the home; (2) the "interpersonal climate" which provides for interaction between the child and literate others in the household; and (3) "emotional and motivational climates" which entails the hopes, fears and expectations that various family members possess regarding literacy.

Hannon (1995) identified four types of family process which contribute to children's literacy development: opportunities, recognition, interaction, and modeling. Hannon believes that children need opportunities to be exposed to literacy resources, as well as active intervention on the part of a literate other (parent or older sibling) to interpret these experiences. The literacy efforts displayed by a child need to be recognized and encouraged. The interpersonal relationship between parents and children is crucial for supporting, explaining, and most importantly, for moving children along in their literacy learning. Parents and others in the family need to model their use of literacy and demonstrate that they too are literacy learners.

It has been suggested that children born into a literate society naturally learn about written language through the wide availability of print material. However, Teale and Sulzby (1999) declare that "literacy is not a universal that is achieved spontaneously" (p.134), rather observational studies of home literacy environments have demonstrated that mediation by a literate person is crucial and can have profound effects on a young child's early literacy development.

Miller (1996), in discussing studies of young children's literacy development conducted in natural settings, also identified the importance of a supportive, responsive adult, in an environment in which children are able to observe the functional meaning of print in everyday life. She maintains that children's progress along the continuum of literacy development will depend on the amount of support and encouragement they receive from parents and other significant adults in their lives. Similarly, Smith's (1993) study focused on a broad descriptive question: What fosters advanced literacy knowledge in preschoolers living in impoverished environments? A key recurring pattern was that within the home there was "an influential individual who directly engaged the child in activities with written language" (p. 14). This could have been a parent, grandparent, other adult, or babysitter. These theories are not unlike those of Vygotsky (1962), particularly the zone of proximal development and support given for learning. Some of these support experiences are presented in the next section.

# Literacy Experiences

Various home literacy studies have identified common mainstream literacy experiences which are believed to contribute a child's literacy development in the early years.

## Storybook Reading

Storybook reading has received more research attention than any other aspect of young children's literacy experiences (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). A long history of research, which has demonstrated a correlation between parental storybook reading with children and their ensuing success with literacy in school, has provided evidence for the role of parents in children's language and literacy development (Bus, vanIjzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995). While some researchers have questioned the predictive strength of the practice (Scarborough & Dubrich, 1994), recent reviews of research reaffirm the importance of shared book reading (Lonigan, 1994, cited in Wasik, Dobbins, & Herrmann, 2001). Paratore (2002) claims that the importance of storybook reading for early literacy success is undisputed.

The early research into storybook reading focused on the frequency of the practice, with little attention given to what was actually happening during book reading sessions. Teale and Sulzby (1999) maintain that while access to storybook reading is important, it is the mediation - the interactions between the parent and child that occur during book reading episodes - that is critical to understanding the effects of storybook

reading on children's literacy development. It is in *how* a parent mediates the literate text for the child - the language and social interaction surrounding the text - that is of most importance for a child's acquisition of literacy. Similarly, Morrow (1997) states that investigations of home read-aloud sessions confirm that active social interaction between parents and children is a major factor in literacy development.

Bus (2001) suggests that the success of storybook reading for early literacy acquisition may be dependent on the ways in which adults mediate the reading experience in response to children's interests, personal experiences, and conceptions. Parents and other family members, with their intimate knowledge of the child's world, are aptly positioned to mediate. Teale and Sulzby (1999) contend that the nature of the interaction during book reading has a direct impact on children's knowledge about, strategies for, and attitudes towards reading.

One of the main goals of storybook reading is the reconstruction of meaning. Morrow believes that some of the ways in which parents mediate in the construction of meaning, include "prompting children to respond, scaffolding responses for children to model when they are unable to respond themselves, relating responses to real-life experiences, answering questions, and offering positive reinforcement for children's responses" (p.136).

Although storybook reading is usually not done for the purpose of deliberately teaching young children to read, Morrow explains that being read to does help a child develop a sense of story structure, it enhances comprehension and knowledge about

books and print, and develops positive attitudes towards reading and writing. Storybook reading plays a key role in the process of becoming literate.

Dickinson and Beales (1994) state that "several decades of research have established that good things happen if you read to children during the preschool years." (p. 29). They cite various studies (Heath, 1982; Purcell-Gates, 1988; Taylor, 1983; Wells, 1985a; Goldfield & Snow, 1984) which indicate that through storybook reading children acquire important language skills, learn to love books, and they do better in school. While the cognitive aspects of storybook reading are often highlighted, Sonnenschein (2002) maintains that reading a book with someone is a social interaction and therefore the social-affective aspects of the interaction are equally important. While the development of literacy skills is important, Arnold and Whitehurst (1994) believe that shared reading should be fun, and that the most important outcome to be realized from storybook reading with children is the cultivation of a love of reading.

Language Interactions

Snow (1993) suggests that "parents' most important contributions to their children's literacy development may come through language interactions rather than print-related activities" (p. 12). Although Snow recognizes that parent-child social interaction during storybook reading positively supports literacy acquisition, she purports that parent-child interactions which promote literacy development go far beyond those centered on books and book reading. It is in the various types of talk that parents and children engage in - as they exchange information, express important feelings, affirm

mutual affection, and enforce discipline and socialization - that opportunities are presented for children to develop oral language skills, which ultimately contribute to literacy development.

Within the context of their families children can and do learn a lot from watching, listening, and participating in conversations. Oral discourse grants children the opportunity to think and acquire information on a wide variety of topics, at the same time learning the forms in which people talk about these topics (Beals, 2001). Family mealtime conversations present opportunities for free-flowing exchanges among family members on all kinds of topics. Beals, De Temple, and Dickinson (1994) believe that "children are full-fledged participants in these conversations, asking for and giving explanations, and joining in the reporting of past events and the planning of future ones" (p. 37).

Beals, through observations of mealtime conversations in the Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development (1987), identified two types of talk - narrative and explanatory - which occur during mealtime conversations and contribute to a child's ability to speak, listen, read, and write. Narrative talk is described as extended discourse about past or future events which takes shape over several turns in a conversation. Through oral narrative children learn key aspects of narrative story form which is important for reading and writing. Explanatory talk during mealtimes provides children with the opportunity to make connections between ideas, events, and actions. As well, it

appears that explanatory talk supports children's vocabulary development (Dickinson & Beales, 1994).

Routine events in the home such as mealtimes provides children with opportunities to build understandings based purely on verbal information and helps to lay the groundwork for future literacy growth. Beals (2001) writes, "when families sit down together for their evening meal, they are not just consuming protein, fat, and carbohydrates but also are engaging in a social interaction in the form of oral language that passes on to the children the values and norms of speech and behavior of the individual parents and the larger community" (p. 75).

## Other Practices

Although investigated to a lesser extent, other variables, such as environmental print, play, and writing experiences, also have been identified in some home studies of early literacy development as contributing to the acquisition of literacy.

### Environmental Print

Living in a print-rich society, environmental print surrounds children. This contextualized print can be personally meaningful for children. Morrow (1997) suggests that children usually read and are curious about environmental print before they become interested in the print contained in books. Through daily routines both inside and outside

of the home, parents who are aware of the importance of environmental print, can point out and read words and labels that are meaningful to their children.

Miller (1998), in discussing the findings from her Environmental Print Diaries Study, writes that "the diaries support the view that literacy interactions around environmental print are taking place in a wide range of everyday contexts such as walking along a road, traveling in and parking a car, getting dressed, preparing and eating food, shopping, and playing with toys" (p. 110). Miller maintains that the "print in the environment is a readily accessible and valuable resource for learning about what written language does in everyday contexts" (p.116).

Play

Although Berk (2001) writes that "eminent child development theorists of the past attached great importance to the role of make-believe play in early development" (p.108), the use of play as a medium for early literacy development has only recently been recognized.

While the literature identifies several different types of play that children participate in, research focusing on make-believe play and young children suggests that play is, first and foremost, a social activity. It is the social interactions during play, initially between the parent and child, that provide stimulating opportunities for language development. Katz (2001), in analyzing various studies of mothers and their young children playing together, highlights a reciprocal influence:

Mothers' talk and play do not merely have an effect on children's talk and play; when children understand language better, talk more, and engage in more pretend play, their mothers respond with more connected talk, more extending questions about the play, and more pretend talk and play, which in turn encourage the children's pretend talk and play (p.59).

While the connection between play and early literacy development continues to be investigated, studies of home environments suggest that the language interaction during play provides another opportunity for young children to advance in their literacy development.

Writing Activities

While the study of how the home environment influences the writing development of young children is limited, many believe that, just as listening, speaking, and reading, children's early experiences with writing occur naturally in the interactions of family life (Morrow, 1997). In homes where children observe the meanings and functions of writing in everyday life, and where children are provided opportunities to experiment with writing, children's understanding of the forms and functions of writing are strengthened .

Teale (1986) believes that availability and accessibility of writing materials is a distinguishing feature in literacy-rich homes. In order for children to experiment with writing, which is crucial for the development of writing, the tools of writing must be readily available and easily accessible to children.

Morrow (1997) writes about the importance of the responses parents have to children's early "writing":

> Expressing genuine pleasure in children's early markings, whether they resemble writing or not, and seeing them as an important step in a long developmental process are positive responses that will encourage children to continue. By continuing their "writing," they will incorporate in it what they are learning about print from the literacy events that fill their lives (p. 271).

Vulelich, Christie, & Enz (2002) believe that most parents vastly underestimate the importance of the critical role they play in their child's language and literacy development. The research literature indicates that families can support young children's acquisition of literacy in a myriad of ways (Saracho, 2002). It is important for parents to understand that there are multiple pathways into literacy.

# Conclusion

Literacy practices and experiences can only be fully understood from their theoretical knowledge and underpinnings. This paper has traced the evolution of theoretical perspectives of child development, early language acquisition, and early literacy development. Each of these perspectives, along with findings from the field of neuroscience, has contributed to the current understanding of the importance of the early years of development. In particular, the recognition that children's language and literacy development begins at birth and is influenced, supported, and extended within the sociocultural context of the family throughout the preschool years, has been supported by research.

Literacy learning develops within the context of daily family life experiences that children are exposed to and participate in. While many of these experiences occur implicitly, studies have demonstrated that family members can also promote children's literacy learning by providing developmentally appropriate literacy activities and materials, within a multitude of settings and contexts.

While there is agreement that families contribute to their children's literacy acquisition in the early years, the nature of this contribution and its relevance outside of mainstream culture continues to be investigated.

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**PAPER TWO**

**Family Literacy: Acknowledging and Supporting Parents as the First and Most Influential Teachers of Children's Early Literacy Development**

**Introduction**

This paper begins with a brief history of early childhood intervention and the emergence of the family literacy movement. Various definitions of family literacy are presented and philosophical dissension, within the field of family literacy, is discussed. A number of family literacy programs are analyzed according to a set of criteria and, as an example, three of the programs are explored in-depth to determine their overall effectiveness in supporting early literacy development within families.

**Early Childhood Intervention and the Beginning of Family Literacy**

Many sources point to the 1960s as the beginning of the modern era in early childhood intervention. Condry (1983) believes that it was findings of research from the fields of psychology, education and sociology conducted over the previous thirty years, which had questioned traditional beliefs of intelligence as a fixed genetic capacity, that led investigators to consider the effect of the environment on development. Studies by Skeels & Dye, 1939, Spitz, 1945, Spitz & Wolf, 1946, as cited in Condry (1983) refuted the view of intelligence as solely determined by genetics and provided evidence that intelligence was responsive to environmental influences. Newer theories resulting from this research proposed that by enriching a child's environment it was not only possible to change a child's IQ, but the subsequent life experiences as well. In addition, the

recognition that early development was different from later development, inferring that environmental effects on development would be greatest during the early years, together with the influence of Bloom's (1964) assertion that environmental changes early in life were more effective than changes later in life, led to the belief that early intervention could have dramatic effects on the ensuing cognitive and behavioral development of children (Condry, 1983).

Condry refers to many writers who point to the intellectual, social, and political climate of the 1960s in the United States which resulted in preschool intervention programs for children of low-income families as a means to "help low-income children enter the public school system on an equal footing with economically more advantaged children" (p.2). Amid the belief that education was the key to breaking the cycle of poverty, early childhood intervention was viewed "as a potential weapon in the war on poverty" (Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000, p.14). The earliest preschool education programs began in the early 1960s and served as models for Project Head Start, a national program launched in 1965 which provided a comprehensive set of services (health, education, and social services) for economically deprived families. The founders of this program assumed that socioeconomically impoverished environments contained experiential and biological risk factors that could adversely affect early childhood development and were convinced that providing compensatory programs during the preschool years would lead to better school adjustment and performance for disadvantaged children (Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000).While Head Start has been extolled for its beneficial effects on children,

families, and their communities ( Lazar & Darlington, 1982), Farran (2000) contends that it has not eliminated school failure, nor the many other social consequences of poverty.

Although literacy and language among family members has long been studied by sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and linguists (Wasik, Dobbins, & Herrmann, 2001), it was not until the late 1970s and early1980s that the concept of "family literacy" emerged in the field of education. Developmental theories such as Vygotsky's social interactionist theory and Brofenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, together with emergent and early literacy perspectives, have all contributed to the realization of the significant role that family members play in children's literacy development. Family systems theories also provide a framework for understanding that intervention would be more effective if it is focused on the family rather than just the parent or the child (St. Pierre & Layzer, 1998).

Several ethnographic and descriptive studies conducted during the 1980s and 1990s (Taylor, 1983; Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Purcell-Gates, 1995) examined naturally occurring literacy practices in families and communities of different cultures and income levels and the relationship between these family practices and later school success. These studies brought about an appreciation of the importance of values and beliefs in supporting language and literacy development within families.  At about the same time a different set of initiatives saw educational services provided for parents and their children to support language and literacy development. Wasik et al., allege that "some of these family literacy interventions developed more from perceived beliefs about

low-literacy adults and their children than from a clearly articulated theoretical base or a strong empirical base" (p. 447). However, since that time, the construct of family literacy has come to refer to "a wide range of beliefs and practices about the roles and transfer of literacy within families, children's literacy, adult literacy, early-childhood education, parenting education, and home-school links related to literacy" (Wasik et al., 2001, p.444).

## Definitions of Family Literacy

Presently there are several overlapping definitions of family literacy in use, demonstrating the diversity of perspectives on family literacy. Hannon (2003) writes that the term family literacy has two meanings. The first "refers to interrelated literacy practices within families" and the second meaning "refers to certain kinds of literacy programmes involving families" *(p. 99).*

In discussing family literacy practices in the United Kingdom, Harrison (1995) distinguishes *family literacy* from *family literacy projects or initiatives* when he writes: "Family literacy is about all the literacy activities that occur in families, and family literacy projects are best viewed as augmenting what is already there rather than as filling a vacuum" (p. 227).

Handel (1999) purports that family literacy initiatives incorporate one or another of at least three distinct categories: (1) programs whose main purpose is to help parents to help their children and also support school learning through home-school partnership programs, (2) intergenerational literacy programs that are designed to foster literacy

development for both parents/caregivers and children, and (3) those definitions founded on research that explores literacy interactions that occur naturally within home and family. These efforts, unlike the two previous definitions which focus on what parents need to learn, "tend to focus on what educators can learn from and about families" (Morrow & Paratore, 1993, p. 197). Each of these definitions emphasizes "literacy interactions, the behaviors and circumstances that promote sharing or transmission of literacy practices and knowledge among family members" (Handel, 1999, p. 7).

Although a concise definition of family literacy does not exist, Morrow (1995) states that "many within the field believe that the richness gained from holding a broad perspective about family literacy far outweighs the benefits of a precise but narrow understanding of the topic" ( p. 2, citing Auerbach, 1989; Taylor, 1983).

## Philosophical Dissension within the Family Literacy Movement

Paratore (1994) describes the field of family literacy as "a complex and muddy arena" (p. 193). In contrasting the perspectives on family literacy, she cites the works of Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson (1985), Clark (1984), and Teale (1984a) who advocate for the training of parents of at-risk children in mainstream literacy practices; juxtaposed against the writings of Auerbach (1989) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1985) who view this approach as "founded on the discredited deficit model of child development in families that are culturally and linguistically distinct" (p. 193). Confronted with this dichotomy, Paratore, quoting scholars from the field, writes:

Should the focus of family literacy be to teach families ways that they can "bring themselves into alignment with the standards of 'gate keeping institutions'" (Lareau, 1989:11) or to find ways to help schools recognize and acknowledge the learning environment created by non-mainstream families and "build effective communication linkages that enhance schooling opportunities for students and their families" (Delgado-Gaitan 1992, p. 512).

While reporting on positive outcomes from a three year project involving an intergenerational approach to literacy on the literacy learning of adults and on the practice of shared literacy at home (the Intergenerational Literacy Project), Paratore admits that she continues to be "tugged at" by those who purport that such programs "intrude in families' lives, impose school-like literacy in home settings, and ignore the life circumstances of individuals in diverse families" (p. 214). It is reflection such as this that has lead many to question whether we should be more focused on what families are already doing to support their child's learning, rather than on what they are not doing. Often referred to as a "strengths or wealth model", this viewpoint acknowledges that all families have strengths and intact literacy patterns within the home. Writers and researchers who propose a wealth model believe that "family literacy providers need to find out what literacy patterns exist within families and build on those patterns, rather than imposing traditional, mainstream school-like activities on parents" (Morrow, 1995, p. 11)

Auerbach (1989), a researcher in the field of family literacy, makes the distinction between *school-transmission* models of family literacy - a narrow definition which

includes reinforcing school-like literacy activities - and a broader definition, which she refers to as *social-contextual* models of family literacy. In proposing a broader definition of family literacy, one that "acknowledges the family's social reality and focuses on the family's strengths" ( p. 165),  Auerbach suggests that we need to begin looking for ways in which literacy and literacy learning can become socially significant in family life. Similarly, Neuman, Caperelli, & Kee (1998) contend that "family literacy programs should be viewed within the cultural context, a way of thinking, behaving, and responding to one's environment" (p. 246), implying that there will be a great variability among programs in order to reflect the specific needs of the participants and the community.

Criticisms of school transmission models of family literacy are not universally accepted (Handel,1999). In referencing the experiences of Shannahan and colleagues (1995), Handel states that "many minority and immigrant families regard mainstream and school-based literacy as the route to success" (p. 137). Likewise, researchers Delpit (1995) and Edwards (1994) are adamant that minority families should not be denied the very opportunities that have assisted middle-class children achieve in school.

Neuman et al., (1998) purport that "family literacy programs are about opportunity, support, and hope" (p. 251). They go on to state:

At their best, they promote substantive changes in literacy uses, enhance people's ability to become part of an increasingly sophisticated and technologically complex society, and bring joy to relationships within and among families and

communities. At their worst, they perpetuate a self-image of deficiency and

inadequacy, driving away the very people the programs have been designed to

help (p. 251).

Auerbach (1995) suggests that most programs fall somewhere along a continuum

between "a prescriptive interventionist model and a participatory, empowering one"

(p. 26). The varying perspectives on family literacy interventions prompted Handel

(1999) to write:

> ….we are faced with the reality of multiple pathways to literacy, multiple uses of
>
> literacy, the need for sensitivity to context and beliefs, and an awareness that
>
> programs evolve and change, as do their participants - instructors and learners
>
> alike. And the voices calling for empowerment are cogent reminders that the
>
> ultimate good of literacy is to enlist it in the cause of social betterment (p. 137).

### Family Literacy Interventions: A Survey of Programs

As the concept of family literacy has evolved in recent years, the number and

variety of family literacy programs, designed to support families in their literacy

development, have increased extensively. Gadsden (1999) reports that since the 1990s the

United States has seen the development of hundreds of family literacy programs which

vary immensely in their purpose and implementation. Even though family literacy

programs are diverse, with multifarious objectives, clientele, activities, and materials,

researchers Padak, Sapin & Baycich (2002), in a study of family literacy programs across

the United States, discovered that they all share a common goal - "to strengthen intergenerational literacy and help parents or caregivers learn that they are their children's first teachers and that they can be successful in this role" (p. 5).

For the purpose of examining family literacy programs I developed a paradigm to guide in the selection of programs to be profiled. From the literature, key components were identified and a chart format is used to present an analysis of the twelve unique family literacy programs. Following the presentation of the identified components the twelve programs are aggregated, according to each of the categories. Following this, three of the twelve programs are profiled in more detail.

Within the Paradigm for Analysing Family Literacy Programs the following descriptors are represented. A brief explanation of each descriptor is given:

*Geographic scope* - Where the program is in place.

*Age range* - The age range of the children targeted for intervention.

*Location* - The place where children are mainly involved in literacy activities.

*School directed versus Home directed* - This distinguishes between programs based on preparing children for school versus programs which focus on a range of literacy activities existing in children's homes and building on these.

*Content* - This reports on the curriculum aspect of the programs.

*Facilitators* - This identifies those who facilitate the program for children.

*Program used at a specified time/space or in any life-space* - This distinguishes between literacy activities which take place in a particular setting at a specified time, versus those which can be incorporated into any life-space of a child. The "any life-space" concept supports the view that "all times are learning times" (Fagan, 2001).

*Books/materials provided* - This identifies whether the program supplies books/materials for children and/or their parents.

*Training for Facilitators* - This examines the type of training facilitators of the program received - whether it is in the form of information provided or in a hands-on, interactive format.

The last five descriptors are self-explanatory. Each of the programs were examined to determine:

*Who sponsors the program?*

*Were internal program evaluations conducted?*

*Were external program evaluations conducted?*

*Were research studies conducted?*

*The general source of funding for the program.*

# A Paradigm for Analysing Family Literacy Programs

| | Program 1 | Program 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Program | Families in Motion | Families Learning Together Program Hants Shore Health Center |
| Geographic Scope | Chilliwack, British Columbia | Nova Scotia |
| Age range | Ages 3 and 4 | Birth to school aged children |
| Location (where children are mainly involved) | Multiple community facilities- elementary school, preschool, Skwah Band Hall | Family home |
| School directed (based on school curriculum) | | ✔ |
| Home directed (range of activities) | ✔ | ✔ |
| Content: Story reading Oral language Reading and writing Other facets of child Development | ✔ ✔ | ✔ ✔ |
| Who facilitates the program for children | A teacher, parent volunteers, and parents of the children | Literacy coordinator and parents |
| Where is the program used with children: - specified time/space - any life-space of the child | ✔ ✔ | ✔ |
| Books/ materials provided | Books, music, toys, and equipment available for use | Literacy booklets/resource materials |
| Training for facilitators: Knowledge/ information Hands-on practice | ✔ ✔ | "Train the trainer" sessions ✔ |
| Who sponsors the program | Chilliwack Family Literacy Council | Hants Shore Health Centre |
| Is there an internal program evaluation | Yes – questionnaires completed by all program stakeholders | Yes – Parent questionnaires |
| Is there an external program Evaluation | No | No |
| Are there research studies | No | No |
| General source of funding | Federal/Provincial cost-shared funding; partner groups within the community | Hants Shore Health Centre, Nova Scotia Department of Education, Dr. Arthur Hines School, National Literacy Secretariat |

# A Paradigm for Analysing Family Literacy Programs

| | Program 3 | Program 4 |
|---|---|---|
| Program | Family Reading Groups Project | HIPPY–Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters |
| Geographic Scope | Originated in Bedfordshire,UK Currently throughout UK | Originated in Jerusalem, currently an international program |
| Age range | Very young children to age 12 | Preschool children aged 3-5 |
| Location (where children are mainly involved) | Homes, libraries and schools | Home-based program |
| School directed (based on school curriculum) Home directed (range of activities) | ✔ | ✔ |
| Content: Story reading Oral language Reading and writing Other facets of child Development | ✔ (Story reading) ✔ (Oral language) | ✔ (Story reading) ✔ (Oral language) ✔ (Other facets of child Development) |
| Who facilitates the program for children | Parents, teachers, school librarians, and public librarians | Paraprofessionals (parents from the same community) and parents |
| Where is the program used with children: - specified time/space - any life-space of the child | ✔ (specified time/space) ✔ (any life-space of the child) | ✔ (any life-space of the child) |
| Books/ materials provided | Library books | Packaged program materials/ storybooks given to families |
| Training for facilitators: Knowledge/ information Hands-on practice | ✔ ✔ | ✔ ✔ |
| Who sponsors the program | United Kingdom Reading Association | Community centers, public school districts, YMCAs, community action agencies, and state educational cooperatives |
| Is there an internal program evaluation | Yes | Yes |
| Is there an external program Evaluation | Yes | Yes |
| Are there research studies | Yes | Yes |
| General source of funding | United Kingdom Reading Association, Department of Education | Public and private agencies |

# A Paradigm for Analysing Family Literacy Program

| | Program 5 | Program 6 |
|---|---|---|
| Program | Intergenerational Literacy Project | Missouri Parents as Teachers (PAT) |
| Geographic Scope | Chelsea, Massachusetts | Originated in St. Louis, Missouri, currently an international program |
| Age range | Preschool and school-aged children | Birth to school entry age |
| Location (where children are mainly involved) | Family home | Family home |
| School directed (based on school curriculum) | | ✔ |
| Home directed (range of activities) | ✔ | ✔ |
| Content:<br>　Story reading<br>　Oral language<br>　Reading and writing<br>　Other facets of child Development | ✔<br>✔<br>✔ | ✔<br>✔<br><br>✔ |
| Who facilitates the program for children | Teachers and tutors work with adult learners/ parents work with their children | Trained parent educators and parents |
| Where is the program used with children:<br>- specified time/space<br>- any life-space of the child | ✔<br>✔ | <br><br>✔ |
| Books/ materials provided | Materials of interest to parents and children's books | Storybooks and resource materials for parents |
| Training for facilitators:<br>　Knowledge/ information<br>　Hands-on practice | ✔<br>✔ | ✔<br>✔ |
| Who sponsors the program | Chelsea public schools, Boston University, community agencies | Mainly school districts |
| Is there an internal program evaluation | Yes | Yes |
| Is there an external program evaluation | No | Yes |
| Are there research studies | Yes | Yes |
| General source of funding | Public and private agencies | State and federal funding |

# A Paradigm for Analysing Family Literacy Programs

|  | Program 7 | Program 8 |
|---|---|---|
| Program | The Parent-Child Home Program | Parenting and Family Literacy Centres |
| Geographic Scope | Originated in Freeport, NY, currently an international program | Toronto, Ontario |
| Age range | Ages 2 and 3 | Infancy to age 4 |
| Location (where children are mainly involved) | Family home | Schools and family home |
| School directed (based on school curriculum) Home directed (range of activities) | ✔ | ✔ |
| Content: Story reading Oral language Reading and writing Other facets of child Development | ✔ ✔ ✔ | ✔ ✔ ✔ |
| Who facilitates the program for children | Trained home visitors and parents | Parent workers, parent volunteers, and parents |
| Where is the program used with children: - specified time/space - any life-space of the child | ✔ | ✔ ✔ |
| Books/ materials provided | Storybooks and toys | Multilingual book lending library, toy lending library |
| Training for facilitators: Knowledge/ information Hands-on practice | ✔ ✔ | ✔ ✔ |
| Who sponsors the program | School districts, public libraries, social service agencies, and community-based organizations | Toronto Board of Education |
| Is there an internal program evaluation | Yes | Yes |
| Is there an external program Evaluation | Yes | Yes |
| Are there research studies | Yes | Yes |
| General source of funding | Local, state, and federal funding | Federal, provincial, municipal, and community partnerships |

# A Paradigm for Analysing Family Literacy Programs

| | Program 9 | Program 10 |
|---|---|---|
| Program | Parenting for a Literate Community | PRINTS – Parents' Roles INteracting with Teacher Support |
| Geographic Scope | New Brunswick | Originated in St. John's, NL; currently implemented at various locations across Canada |
| Age range | Pre-school aged children | Pre-age 1 to age 6 |
| Location (where children are mainly involved) | Family resource centres and family homes | Family home |
| School directed (based on school curriculum) Home directed (range of activities) | ✔ | ✔ |
| Content: Story reading Oral language Reading and writing Other facets of child Development | ✔ ✔ ✔ ✔ | ✔ ✔ ✔ ✔ |
| Who facilitates the program for children | Early Intervention Personnel, Family Resource Staff and Parents | Parents, caregivers, family members, babysitters |
| Where is the program used with children: - specified time/space - any life-space of the child | ✔ | ✔ |
| Books/ materials provided | Supplementary materials for parents and children | Books, games, or toys; parent handbook |
| Training for facilitators: Knowledge/ information Hands-on practice | ✔ ✔ | ✔ ✔ |
| Who sponsors the program | The Early Childhood Centre, University of New Brunswick | Prints Family Literacy Network |
| Is there an internal program evaluation | Yes | Yes |
| Is there an external program evaluation | Unknown | Yes |
| Are there research studies | Yes | Yes |
| General source of funding | Health Canada – CAPC/CPNP National Projects Fund | Public and private funding |

# A Paradigm for Analysing Family Literacy Programs

|  | Program 11 | Program 12 |
|---|---|---|
| Program | Reading Starts With Us | Shared Beginnings – A Reading is Fundamental (RIF) initiative |
| Geographic Scope | New York | Throughout the United States |
| Age range | Preschool age through first grade | Infants and toddlers |
| Location (where children are mainly involved) | Family home | Schools, community centers, daycare's and the family home |
| School directed (based on school curriculum) | ✔ | ✔ |
| Home directed (range of activities) |  | ✔ |
| Content:<br> Story reading<br> Oral language<br> Reading and writing<br> Other facets of child<br> Development | ✔<br>✔ | ✔<br>✔<br>✔<br>✔ |
| Who facilitates the program for children | Parents | Program coordinators and teen parents |
| Where is the program used with children: - specified time/space<br>    - any life-space of the child | ✔ | ✔<br>✔ |
| Books/ materials provided | Quality children's books | Idea book for parents; books of interest to teenage parents; books for children; |
| Training for facilitators:<br> Knowledge/ information<br> Hands-on practice | ✔<br>✔ | ✔<br>✔ |
| Who sponsors the program | Center for Intergenerational Reading | Schools, community groups, and agencies |
| Is there an internal program evaluation | Yes | Yes |
| Is there an external program Evaluation | Unknown | Unknown |
| Are there research studies | Yes | Yes |
| General source of funding | Privately funded | Public and private agencies |

## A Synopsis of the Family Literacy Programs Profiled

The twelve family literacy programs profiled, though diverse in many aspects, share a myriad of common traits as evidenced in the following synopsis:

*Geographic scope* - The programs chosen represent a variety of localized (6 programs), national (3 programs), and international (3 programs) initiatives.

*Age range* - All of the programs focus on preschool-aged children; some programs span to include children beyond school entry age.

*Location (where children are mainly involved)* - While a variety of locations are identified, the family home is prevalent in almost all of the programs.

*School directed versus Home directed* - While many of the programs express the necessity of preparing children for school entry, there are a number that reflect a combination of school directed and home directed activities.

*Content* - While many family literacy programs focus exclusively on parents or caregivers reading to children, all of the programs presented in this profile include more than storybook reading. Several incorporate multiple content, reflective of the current perspectives on emergent and early literacy development; the interrelated and concurrent nature of listening, speaking, reading, and writing development.

*Facilitators (of the program) for children* -  Depending on the type of program, children may receive support from various people. However, the one constant, named in each of the programs profiled is a child's parent. This reflects the belief acknowledged by all of the programs presented - that the parent is the first and most influential teacher of the child.

*Program used with children at a specified time/space or in any life-space* - While some of the programs take place within a specified time/space, all of the programs profiled go beyond barriers of time and place to reflect an "any life-space of the child" concept.

*Books/materials provided* - All of the programs provide books and/or materials for both parents and children. While some have lending libraries (books, toys, games, etc.), many of the programs supply materials and/or books for families to keep. The provision of storybooks for children was a common feature of most of the programs.

*Training for Facilitators* - Almost all of the programs provide both information and hands-on practice for facilitators.

*Program sponsors* - Sponsors of the programs vary from program to program. Localized programs usually have one sponsor, whereas national and international programs are sponsored by a variety of different groups.

*Internal program evaluation* - All of the programs (except Program 3, for which this information was unavailable) conduct internal program evaluations. These evaluations often involve feedback from participants and facilitators of the programs.

*External program evaluation* - Of the twelve programs profiled, the six which had external evaluations were either national or international programs. The more localized programs did not conduct external evaluations. This information was not readily available for three of the programs (reported as unknown).

*Research studies* - Ten of the twelve programs profiled reported that research studies had been conducted. This is reflective of the recognition, within the field of family literacy, that evaluation of initiatives are critical in determining effective practices.

*Source of funding* - Funding sources vary from program to program. Most of the programs are funded by a combination of public (mainly government grants) and private agencies (foundations, corporations, etc.).

**An In-depth Look at Three Comprehensive Family Literacy Programs**

The Paradigm for Analysing Family Literacy Programs provides a list of descriptors as to what constitutes a program. In order to understand how these descriptors

can provide a sense of the totality of a program, a summary of three programs, as an example, are given. These programs were chosen so as to provide a provincial, national, and an international perspective.

*Missouri Parents as Teachers (PAT)* is an early childhood parent education support program serving families throughout pregnancy until their child enters Kindergarten. This universal, voluntary program, which is open to all families with no income or other risk-related requirements for eligibility, is designed to enhance child development and school achievement.

Launched by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in 1981, with the goal of reducing the number of children entering Kindergarten in need of special help, the Parents as Teachers program is currently implemented in over 2000 sites in 49 states in the US and in 6 other countries. In 1987 the Parents as Teachers National Center (PATNC) was established to provide training and leadership for the program.

Designed as a partnership with families to give children the best possible start in life, the Parents as Teachers program is based on three fundamental principles: first, that children begin learning at birth and do their most important developing before they enter school; second, that parents are their children's first and most influential teachers; and third, that all parents want to be good parents. PAT gives parents information, guidance,

and support during their children's first years, thereby empowering parents to foster the abilities and attitudes which will contribute to children's successful school experiences.

The central component of PAT involves a series of home visits by certified parent educators who provide information and support to enhance their children's development across social, emotional, intellectual, and physical domains. These home visits follow a set of curricula of learning activities which the parent educator models with the child. Booksharing is an integral part of every visit and resource materials for parents are written in two reading levels. In conjunction with the home visits, PAT also offers parent group meetings, annual child development screenings, and referrals to any needed community services.

Many sources report that the key to success of the PAT program is adaptability. Although it is now an international model, with a comprehensive curriculum, evaluation studies and lessons learned in the field demonstrate that the program is adaptable to the needs of broadly diverse families and cultures (Winter, 2001).

Parents as Teachers programs are evaluated frequently. A 1985 comparative study (Pfannenstiel & Seltzer, 1985) found that by age 3, PAT children were significantly advanced over their peers in language, social development, problem solving, and other intellectual abilities. As well, parents were more knowledgeable about child rearing practices and child development. The positive results of this study led to widespread implementation of PAT, supported by legislation, in Missouri (Ethers & Ruffin, 1990).

Many of the findings from independent evaluation studies also appear to demonstrate the effectiveness of PAT (Coates, 1996; Pfannensteil, 1989; Pfannenstiel, Lambson, & Yarnell, 1991; Pfannenstiel & Seltzer, 1989; Wheeler, 1994;).

Winter (2001) writes about the cost-effectiveness of PAT. She suggests that the implementation of PAT may result in major savings for school districts, in the elimination of special education services for children who might otherwise have need this intervention. As well, Winter cites the low cost of  program implementation as appealing; expenses are limited mainly to the salary and travel of parent educators. Parents are also encouraged to take advantage of the learning opportunities that take place in everyday living, using materials found in most homes. Winter believes that it is the evidence of its effectiveness, along with its affordability, which have been central to the growth of the PAT program.

Although most of the sources reviewed report positively on the Parents as Teachers model,  Farran (2000) is concerned that universal, voluntary, statewide support programs, such as the Missouri PAT, may be "equated with intervention programs aimed at helping children for whom school failure is a distinct possibility" (p. 525). He cautions:

> The danger of the Missouri PAT program lies in trying to make more of it than it is, and other states coming to believe that voluntary support for new parents is the same as intervening with children from families beset by chronic poverty and disorganization (p. 525).

*Parenting and Family Literacy Centres (Toronto)* are centre-based programs following an intergenerational participation model, supporting more than 7000 culturally and linguistically diverse families, and 11,000 children each year. The program participant caregivers range in age from teenagers to grandparents. The majority of the families who access this program live in poverty (Gordon, 1998).

In 1981, under the direction of Mary Gordon, the Toronto Board of Education established Parenting Centres for parents and caregivers of children up to four years of age, in the inner-city areas of Toronto, in an effort to promote children's future academic success. By 1998, 34 Parenting and Family Literacy Centres had been established to provide families with parenting support and education, information on community services, and programs for parents and caregivers of preschool children, providing information, interventions, and interactions designed to contribute to optimal development of young children in all areas.

Built on the belief that the preschool years are crucial to a child's development, the Centres recognize the parent as the child's first and most influential teacher and, as such, supporting parents in this role is a critical strategy. Maintaining the view that the family is the answer to, rather than the cause of problems, this strengths-based model of family literacy holds a "respect for all families" as its core value (Gordon, 1998).

The goals of the program include: improving academic outcomes for disadvantaged children through early education; increased support for parents of children from infancy to age four; and providing instruction to parents of young children in the

areas of child development, emergent literacy, and numeracy (Thomas, Skage, & Jackson, 1998).

The centres are always located in schools so as to provide for easy communication and trusting relationships to develop between parents, school staff, and community. As well, it is the hope that by introducing parents early and positively to the school system, long term involvement of parents in their child's education may result, which may, in turn, contribute to their child's academic success.

A key component of every session at the Centre is circle time. During this time of music and story reading, parents and children together learn various chants, rhymes, songs, and finger plays. In 1997, learning materials were developed to foster family literacy and numeracy development (Mayfield, 2001). A primary teaching and learning strategy utilized is role play. The curricula, using easily accessible materials found in most homes, have been developed and presented at workshops on child development and early literacy (Thomas et al., 1998).

The Parenting and Family Literacy Centres offer a range of services including a multilingual book lending libraries, toy lending libraries, parenting courses, and family literacy evenings (Mayfield, 2001).

Internal evaluations are conducted regularly in the form of feedback from program participants, as parents complete a follow-up questionnaire on all aspects of the program. Gordon (1998) believes that "the impact of the Centres has as many

interpretations as the participants who offer feedback. Each voice speaks to the individual need that is being met by our centres and the work that is being done there to break the cycle of illiteracy and poor school performance" (p. 147).

Gordon maintains that educators believe in the family literacy work of the Centres; they see how children benefit from participation and observe parental involvement in children's education increasing. One of the major challenges identified by Gordon relates to the future viability of the Centres. Although they are part of school board programs, they are not government mandated, and therefore are at risk of being cut when a shortfall of funds occurs.

Gordon (1998) believes that it is the work of family literacy instruction is "to provide families with the information and support they need to educate their very young children" and that "family literacy / numeracy instruction and parenting education have a multiplier effect in that the immediate impact on individual children carries over to the raising of new generations" (p. 150).

**_PRINTS (Parents' Roles Interacting with Teacher Support)_** is a comprehensive, parent-focused, family literacy program designed to empower parents or caregivers of children pre-age 1 to age 6, as supporters of their young children's literacy development. It can also assist teachers, especially preschool teachers and teachers of kindergarten and

grade 1, in understanding how home and school can work together as effective partners in fostering children's early literacy development.

Based on a modified form of a model that originated in England (Hannon,1995), PRINTS was initiated in 1996 as a pilot project and was successfully implemented in two community centers in St. John's, NL (Fagan & Cronin, 1998). Since that time, literacy providers in several provinces in Canada, the United States, Britain, and Finland have or are currently implementing the PRINTS Program ( Prints Family Literacy Network). Described as a culturally responsive, "asset" based (as opposed to a "deficit" based) family literacy program ( Fagan & Cronin, 1998), PRINTS was first developed for low-income parents but participants may include "any group of parents and teachers who wish to better understand and help young children's early literacy development" (Thomas, Skage, & Jackson,1998, p. 74).

While the PRINTS program encompasses several intended learning outcomes, the overall goals of the program are to empower parents through 1) developing an awareness of those literacy activities that they are currently engaged in, and 2) providing opportunities for parents to become familiar with a range of other literacy activities designed to foster literacy development for their preschool children.

The PRINTS program provides training for parents over a minimum 12 week period with two-hour sessions per week. While there is a set format for each session, the program is flexible, providing opportunities for parent input and reflection. Described by one of the authors as holistic in nature (Fagan, 2001), trained facilitators of the PRINTS

program assist parents in exploring five STEPS or contexts in which literacy learning develops (talk/oral language, play, books and book sharing, environmental print, and scribbling, drawing, writing) and the five ROLES they may take on within each of the STEPS (providing opportunities, recognition, effective interaction, modeling literacy, and setting guidelines). Through hands-on experiences parents can learn 40 activities across the different STEPS, covering a wide range of social and cognitive skills. The PRINTS program is viewed as cost-effective as all of the activities can be carried out by parents without significant cost. Many of the materials needed for the activities can be easily made using readily available materials found in most homes. A parent video, demonstrating parents and children engaged in some of the activities, is available for viewing and a Parent Handbook is given to the parents. At the end of each of the sessions participants are presented with a small book, toy or game for their children. Viewed as motivational for the parents, it is also a means to involve the children in PRINTS even though they may not actually attend sessions.

In order to determine its success, the PRINTS program utilizes formative and summative evaluations, in the form of parent and child focused evaluation activities, during and at the end of the program. In addition, in an effort to determine what parts of the program are meaningful for the parents and to discover the extent of children's involvement in PRINTS activities, facilitators are encouraged to keep a journal, recording important information revealed through parent input during the different sessions.

A major research study (Fagan, 2001) investigated the success of the PRINTS Program by examining the effects of the transfer of learning from trainers of facilitators, to facilitators as trainers of parents, to parents, and children. The top and bottom quartiles (based on literacy measures) of 80 children whose parents had participated in the PRINTS Program were studied. Positive characteristics of different groups of stakeholders were identified. In brief, parents who were the recipients of training by effective facilitators, who in turn had experienced an effective orientation to the PRINTS Program were most successful with their children. Other analyses within the larger sociocultural context showed that there are factors in early literacy learning that are beyond stakeholder control, and that the nature of literacy events and range of early literacy adult mentors must be considered.

The PRINTS program is currently undergoing revision to provide age appropriate activities from birth -2 years and from ages 3 - 5/6 years. There will be more than 30 activities for both age ranges, and approximately 20% will be health-based activities. Program participants will be able to take part in five discussions on health issues. In addition, an Aboriginal PRINTS Supplement is currently being developed in Regina, Saskatchewan (Fagan, personal communication, October 29, 2004).

Believing in the need for family literacy programs to reflect a social-contextual orientation, Anderson, Fagan & Cronin (1998) write that "we attempted to make PRINTS meaningful and purposeful and functional in the lives of the families with whom we worked" (p. 280).

# Summary Statement

Each of the programs profiled in this paper, though diverse in many aspects, reflect a strengths-based perspective of family literacy. Acknowledging and supporting parents as the first and most influential teachers of literacy development is a guiding principle of all of these initiatives.

Through an examination of numerous family literacy programs, it becomes obvious that one size does not fit all but rather a wide variety of programs are needed to meet diverse situations. Auerbach (1997) writes that "one of the points on which most family literacy researchers agree is that program structures should be context-specific and responsive to the populations they serve and that no single model fits all situations" (p. 78).

The paradigm descriptors show that some programs are sensitive to the home situation and life space of the child. Literacy learning is a social practice, with its multiple functions and real-life uses shared between family and community. Some authors stress the importance of providing children and families with meaningful cultural literacy development experiences. Neuman et al. (1998) believe that family literacy programs must reflect the cultural practices and social conditions that embody family life. Similarly, Wasik et al.(2001) writes:

Family culture, beliefs, and practices around literacy need to be considered in any intervention effort. Programs should meet the family where they are and

collaborate with parents with respect to adult education needs, support for parent-child interactions around literacy, language and socialization, and family needs. We believe that this collaboration needs to involve parents in planning and provide them with choices about parent-child interactions and opportunities to try out different options (p. 454).

Neuman et al., suggest that with the current high profile and growing interest in family literacy, the time has come to critically analyze the field of family literacy. While they believe that great strides have been made in "appreciating and understanding the diversity and complexities of working with families" (p. 251), we need to go further. They maintain that "now is the time to reexamine our assumptions, to reflect on our practices, to engage communities more actively in their own education" and "to pose new questions, rather than presume to have all the answers" (p. 251).

Morrow & Paratore (1993), believing that a majority of family literacy initiatives are aimed at direct services programs, call for an emphasis to be placed on the evaluation of these initiatives. They maintain that the data gathered from research into these practices "will be critical in determining the kinds of practices most beneficial in promoting family literacy" (p. 199).

## Conclusion

This paper has delved into the family literacy movement to examine various definitions, issues, and initiatives within the domain. It supports the view that family literacy should be examined from the broadest of perspectives.

The twelve unique family literacy programs profiled, representing a range of local, national, and international initiatives, appear to embrace a similar goal of acknowledging and supporting parents as the first and most influential teachers of early literacy development. The three programs examined in-depth represent comprehensive, strengths-based models of family literacy.

Family literacy is a complex, multifaceted field of study. The literature suggests that there is widespread agreement about the importance of family literacy. Scholars within the field believe that those family literacy programs which are designed and implemented based on families' existing strengths, and in which needs are identified collaboratively with families and communities, will be most effective in supporting parents as the first teachers of early literacy learning.

While there is agreement as to the importance and potential of family literacy, further investigation is needed to determine effective practices and to form a basis to guide future policy and program planning.

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## Family Literacy Programs

**Program 1: Families in Motion**
            **Chilliwack, British Columbia**

Bate, B. (1998). Families in Motion: Chilliwack, British Columbia. In A.Thomas (Ed.), *Family Literacy in Canada: Profiles of Effective Practices* (pp. 55-69).Welland, ON: éditions Soleil publishing, inc .

**Program 2: Families Learning Together Program**
            **Hants Shore, Nova Scotia**

Helliwell, P. (1998). Learning Together at the Hants Shore Health Centre. In A.Thomas (Ed.), *Family Literacy in Canada: Profiles of Effective Practices* (pp. 107-115).Welland, ON: éditions Soleil publishing, inc .

Mayfield, M. (2001). *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada.* Toronto: Prentice Hall.

**Program 3: Family Reading Groups Project**
            **United Kingdom**

Harrison, C. (1995). Family Literacy Practices in the United Kingdom-An International Perspective. In L. Morrow (Ed.), *Family Literacy: Connections in Schools and Communities* (pp. 223-235). NJ: International Reading Association.

**Program 4: HIPPY - Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters**
            **An International Program**

HIPPYUSA: Home Instruction for parents of Preschool Youngsters. Retrieved October 12, 2004, from http://www.hippyusa.org/Model/model.html

Morrow, L., Tracey, D., & Maxwell, C. (Eds.). (1995). *A survey of family literacy in the United States* (pp. 18-19). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

**Program 5: Intergenerational Literacy Project**
              **Chelsea, Massachusetts**

Paratore, J. (2001). *Opening Doors, Opening Opportunities: Family Literacy in an Urban Community.* Needhan Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

**Program 6: Missouri Parents as Teachers (PAT)**
              **St. Louis, Missouri**

Brooks-Gunn, J, Berlin, L., & Fuligni, A. (2000). Early Childhood Intervention Programs: What About the Family? In J. Shonkoff & S. Meisels (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention* (pp. 549-577). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Coates, D. (1996). Early childhood evaluation. A report to the Parkway School District Board of Education. Chesterfield, Mo.

Ethers, V., & Ruffin, M. (1990). The Missouri Project - Parents as Teachers. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 23, 1-14.

Farran, D. (2000). Another Decade of Intervention. In J. Shonkoff & S. Meisels (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention* (pp.510 -548). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Morrow, L., Tracey, D., & Maxwell, C. (Eds.). (1995). *A survey of family literacy in the United States* (pp. 31-32). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Pfannensteil, J. (1989). *New Parents as Teachers project: A follow-up investigation.* Overland Park, KS: Research & Training Associates.

Pfannenstiel, J., Lambson, T., & Yarnell, V. (1991). *Second wave study of the Parents as Teachers program.* Overland Park, KS: Research & Training Associates.

Pfannenstiel, J. & Seltzer, D. (1985). *Evaluation report: New Parents as Teachers project.* Overland Park, KS: Research & Training Associates.

Pfannenstiel, J. & Seltzer, D. (1989). New parents as teachers: Evaluation of an early parent education program. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 4, 1-18.

Wasik, B., Dobbins, D., & Herrmann S. (2001). Intergenerational Family Literacy: Concepts, Research, and Practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (pp. 444-458). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Wheeler, W. (1994). *A study of the Missouri Parents as Teachers program and its effects on the readiness skills of children entering kindergarten in southwest Missouri public schools. Blue Eye, MO: Blue Eye School District.*

Winter, M. (2001). Parents as Teachers: Improving the Odds with Early Intervention. In B. Sornson (Ed.), *Preventing Early Learning Failure* (chapter 11). Retrieved October 15, 2004, from http://www.ascd.org/publications/books /2001sornson/ 2001sornsontoc.html

Zigler, E., Finn-Stevenson, M. & Hall, N. (2002). *The First Three Years and Beyond: Brain Development and Social Policy.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

**Program 7: The Parent-Child Home Program**
              **An International Program**

Allen, L., & Sethi, A. (2004). Bridging the Gap Between Poor and Privileged. *American Educator,* AFT Publications. Summer 2004. Retrieved October 15, 2004, from http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/summer04/gap.htm

Parent Child Home Program: Soaring To Success Through Books and Play. Retrieved October 15, 2004, from http://www.collaborative.org/ec_homeprogram.html

Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. Preventative Services - Parent-Child Home Program. Retrieved October 15, 2004, from http://www.dpw.state.pa.us /Child/ ChildWelfare/003670977.htm

Zigler, E., Finn-Stevenson, M. & Hall, N. (2002). *The First Three Years and Beyond: Brain Development and Social Policy.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

**Program 8: Parenting and Family Literacy Centres**
              **Toronto, Ontario**

Gordon, M. (1998). Parenting and Family Literacy Centres of the Toronto District School Board. In A.Thomas (Ed.), *Family Literacy in Canada: Profiles of Effective Practices* (pp. 139-151).Welland, ON: éditions Soleil publishing, inc .

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**Program 9: Parenting for a Literate Community**
      **University of New Brunswick**
      **Fredericton, New Brunswick**

UNB Early Childhood Research Team (1999). Parenting for a Literate Community, University of New Brunswick. Retrieved October 18, 2004, from http://www.unbf. ca/education/ecc/plc/who.htm

Whitty, P., Nason, P., & Hunt, A. (2000). Parenting for a Literate Community: Family Literacy in a Critical Literacy Framework. *Canadian Children,* 25 (2), 15-20.


**Program 10: PRINTS - Parents' Roles Interacting with Teacher Support**
      **St. John's, NL**

Anderson, J., Fagan, W. & Cronin, M. (1998). Insights in Implementing Family Literacy Programs. In E. Sturtevant, J. Dugan, P. Linder, & W. Linek (Eds.), *Literacy and Community: The Twentieth Yearbook of The College Reading Association* (pp. 269-281). Carrollton, GA: College Reading Association.

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Fagan, W. & Cronin, M. (1998). *Growing into Literacy: PRINTS (Parents' Roles Interacting with Teacher Support).* St. John's, NF: Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Hannon, P. (1995). *Literacy, Home, and School: Research and Practice in Teaching Literacy with Parents.* London: Falmer Press.

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PRINTS FAMILY LITERACY NETWORK. Retrieved October 15, 2004, from http://www.nald.ca/prints

**Program 11: Reading Starts With Us**
  **New York**

Morrow, L., Tracey, D., & Maxwell, C. (Eds.). (1995). *A survey of family literacy in the United States* (pp. 78-80). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.


**Program 12: Shared Beginnings - A Reading is Fundamental (RIF) Initiative**
  **USA**

Graves, R. & Wendorf, J. (1995). The Reading Is Fundamental Motivational Approach to Family Literacy. In L. Morrow (Ed.), *Family Literacy: Connections in Schools and Communities* (pp. 129-142). NJ: International Reading Association.

**PAPER THREE**

**Supporting Families - The First Teachers of Early Literacy Development:
Newfoundland and Labrador**

**Introduction**

This paper begins with a brief rationale for supporting literacy development in the

early years, incorporating many of the ideas brought forth in the previous two papers. A

description of early literacy/family literacy programs that currently exist in

Newfoundland and Labrador are presented. Organizations and agencies which are

responsible for early literacy/family literacy, within the Province, are identified and their

roles in setting policy and impacting the scene are discussed. This paper concludes with

suggested guidelines for the advancement of early literacy/family literacy in

Newfoundland and Labrador.

**A Rationale for Supporting Literacy Development in the Early Years**

The current understanding of the importance of the early years as it relates to

language and literacy development is supported by research and the resultant theories

from the fields of child development, early language acquisition, emergent and early

literacy development, and most recently, neuroscience.

A child's language and literacy *education* begins at birth and is influenced,

supported, and extended within the sociocultural context of the family, throughout the

preschool years. Research suggests that exposure to developmentally appropriate implicit

and explicit experiences, within a multitude of settings and contexts, can and does move

children along in their language and literacy learning. The significant role that families play in a young child's language and literacy acquisition is widely accepted.

The family literacy movement grew out of an awareness of the substantial influence and contribution that families make as first teachers of early literacy learning. Efforts to support families in this role have emanated in numerous, diverse initiatives, world-wide. The design and implementation of some of these programs has resulted in controversies centered around strengths-based versus deficit-based models of support. Many scholars within the field believe that effective family literacy programs are those founded on the principle of families as the first teachers of literacy, and are designed and based on families' existing strengths, and where needs are identified collaboratively with targeted families and communities.

### Family Literacy Programs: Newfoundland and Labrador

In an effort to describe family literacy programs that currently exist in this province I consulted various resources but was unable to get a clear picture of the current status of the family literacy movement in Newfoundland and Labrador. To the best of my understanding and through extensive searching and communication with the Executive Director of the Literacy Development Council, as well as a representative of the Literacy Branch of the Department of Education, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, it appears that a listing or directory of such programs is non-existent. A directory of family literacy programs that are available for use with families within the province, including a description of the program and contact information, is important, not only for those

studying this fairly recent phenomenon, but perhaps more importantly, for those persons interested in implementing a family literacy program within a particular community.

In October 2000, a conference titled *Gathering Voices: Building an Alliance for Family Literacy,* was held in St. John's, NL. Approximately 200 people, including participants from literacy development programs, family resource centers, daycare centres, Health and Community Services, schools and school boards, the Department of Education, and parents, attended this conference. At the final plenary session participants discussed how to move family literacy along in this province. Together with the need for increased funding from government and private sources, it was agreed that those "interested in participating in literacy development programs need access to information about available programs and resources. Suggestions included a provincial website, a directory of literacy programs, and an annual gathering to network, to share information and to continue to build a strong alliance for family literacy" (Proceedings Report, p. 2). It would appear that these actions have not materialized.

The following "packaged" family literacy programs focussed on children at a preschool level are available for distribution in Newfoundland and Labrador. A brief description of each is included.


*Books for Babies* - Books for Babies ® is an early intervention program offered free of charge, where available, for newborns and their parents/caregivers in Newfoundland and Labrador. The program delivery involves distribution, by volunteers,

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of an initial package of materials to newborns and their parents/guardians through various venues. Pending funding, the program also provides follow-up packages to children ages one to four.

*NFLD (Nourishing Foundations for Literacy Development)* - NFLD is a seven-module program for parents/caregivers of pre-school children. It aims to build strong foundations for literacy development from birth to age five. The program provides training for parents on how to create a positive literacy environment through caring, playing, oral language and print activities.

*Parent-Child Mother Goose Program* - The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program, which originated in Toronto, is an oral language program which provides group experiences for parents/caregivers and their babies/preschoolers. It focuses on the pleasures of sharing nursery rhymes, songs and stories orally, and provides parents/caregivers with the skills and resources needed to use them outside of the program.

*PRINTS ( Parents' Roles INteracting with Teacher Support)* - PRINTS  is a comprehensive, parent-focused, family literacy program designed to empower parents or caregivers of children pre-age 1 to age 6, as supporters of their young children's literacy development. The goal of PRINTS is to engage parents in many literacy building

activities as part of everyday family and community life. While focusing on the ROLES parents can play, hands-on experiences provide parents with opportunities to learn a number of activities which they, in turn, can share with their children. (A more detailed description of the PRINTS program can be found in paper two of this Paper Folio)

*SORT (Significant Others as Reading Teachers)*- SORT is a home-school partnership program in which parents/caregivers learn to incorporate literacy practices for children into the everyday life of home and community, as well as support students with school-based reading activities. It provides interested parents/caregivers with information about reading practices that support literacy development of pre-school and kindergarten aged children.

## Responsibility for Early Literacy/Family Literacy in Newfoundland and Labrador

A number of organizations/agencies share the responsibility for setting policy and/or impacting the field of early literacy/family literacy in Newfoundland and Labrador.

*Literacy Development Council Newfoundland and Labrador* - This Council was legislated by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador in June 1994. The Mandate of the Council is to access and respond to the literacy needs of the people of the Province as those needs are perceived by community committees, local organizations, private

citizens, or other groups, and to ensure quality programming and services are provided. The Council is a registered charity and a provincial corporation.

An evaluation of the LDC, the first since its inception, was carried out between October 2002 and March 2003. The Literacy Branch of the Department of Education, Newfoundland and Labrador called for this evaluation to "determine whether, given the current demand and challenges in the field of literacy in the province, changes are required to the role, responsibilities, and structure of the LDC" (p. 2). As well, "to analyze the working relationship between the Literacy Branch and the LDC" (The Institute for the Advancement of Public Policy, Inc., March 2003, p.2).

According to the final report – "Evaluation of the Literacy Development Council of Newfoundland and Labrador" (March 2003) - key stakeholders within the field, including those from the Department of Education, members of the LDC, and the community-based literacy agencies, all questioned the appropriate place of the LDC in literacy development in the province.

Since the beginning of the LDC, knowledge and understanding of literacy has changed considerably. The Government now holds a much broader view of literacy. Adult literacy, once the focus of many initiatives and policies, has been replaced with a view of literacy as a life-long activity. Although LDC continues to support adult literacy and family literacy programs, the evaluation discovered that the creation of the Strategic Literacy Funding Committee has resulted in a deferral of early childhood and school-aged children's issues to the Department of Education.

The consultants who conducted the evaluation of the LDC presented a set of ten recommendations for consideration which included the Provincial Government retaining an arms-length agency to advise government on the literacy development needs in the province and a renaming and restructuring of the Literacy Development Council.

The current Literacy Development Council was disbanded on December 31, 2004 ( Email Communication, December 31, 2004). There is no public information available related to this matter.

*Department of Education, Literacy Branch, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador -* In 2000, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador released a *Strategic Literacy Plan* for the province. This plan was developed through consultation with literacy stakeholders to improve literacy within the province and to ensure the most effective and efficient use of resources. It covers literacy for all ages, both within and outside the formal education system, and outlines strategic directions in many areas, including early literacy. The Literacy Branch within the Department of Education is charged with the mandate of implementing this Plan in partnership with other departments, levels of government and community stakeholders. The office also assumes direct responsibility for early literacy/family literacy. The director of The Literacy Branch chairs the Strategic Literacy Funding Committee and is an advisory member to the Literacy Development Council. The Literacy Branch has now been restructured as the Division of Adult Literacy and Learning.

The provincial *Early Childhood and Family Literacy* initiatives include the provision of grants totaling up to $250,000 annually for the delivery of early childhood/family literacy programs throughout the province; the development and implementation of a province-wide pre-kindergarten orientation program, entitled Kinderstart, aimed at parents/caregivers and their children; and a provincial assessment of Early Childhood and Family Literacy Programs in Newfoundland and Labrador to determine best practices for future grant funding. While grants are awarded annually to various groups and the Kinderstart program is up and running throughout the province, information regarding a provincial assessment of effective early childhood and family literacy programs operating in the Province has not been made public.

*AECENL* (*Association of Early Childhood Educators, Newfoundland and Labrador*) - The AECENL lists, among its many objectives, "to be a strong voice for quality child care and education on behalf of children and their families" and "to inform parents, the community, and policy makers of the value of Early Childhood Education." AECENL is an affiliate of the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCF), and through its regional branches, its voice is represented on advisory committees for ECE training programs and on the Early Childhood Services Advisory Committee, Division of Family and Rehabilitative Services, Department of Health and Community Services. As well, the AECENL represented the province on the steering committee of the Atlantic Child Care Coalition, formed to address child care needs in the Atlantic Provinces.

*NLTA (Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers Association)* - While there are two Special Interest Councils within the association which deal with issues related to literacy – READ (Reading, English, and Drama Teachers) Special Interest Council and the Primary Teachers Council – their focus and initiatives appear to be directed mainly at school-aged children. It would appear that early literacy/family literacy is not included in their mandate.

*PACAL ( Provincial Association of Childcare Administrators Licentiate*) – This association recently formed a Liason Committee with the Provincial Government's Child Care Department in order to provide a forum for both PACAL and government to bring forth issues that have broad application to child care services and to present opportunities for their discussion. While this association's focus is on the field of early learning it does not appear to include early literacy/family literacy within its mandate.

*Department of Health and Community Services* - In June 2001, the details of a five-year, $36.6 million, early childhood development (ECD) initiative, the first federal/ provincial comprehensive program under the National Children's Agenda, was revealed. Led by the Department of Health and Community Services, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, this interdepartmental program (including Human Resources and Employment and Education) recognizes the importance of the early years and the valuable role families and communities play in supporting children. Consultation with early childhood stakeholders resulted in *Stepping into the Future,* a program

designed specifically to meet the needs of children and their families of Newfoundland and Labrador. Focusing on the prenatal to age six period, the four areas of action include 1) healthy pregnancy, birth, and infancy; 2) parenting and family supports; 3) early childhood development, learning and care; and 4) community supports. In the news release dated June 18, 2001, representatives of the government departments responsible for this program stated that this commitment to early childhood development initiatives will support the objectives of government's Strategic Social Plan and will go "a long way to promoting early childhood development and achieving our goal of raising the provincial literacy levels, a priority identified in the province's Strategic Literacy Plan" (Minister Foote, June 18, 2001).

A Fact Sheet on *Stepping into the Future* (June, 2001) suggested that, at the time, many of the early childhood literacy programs in the province are offered on an ad hoc and/or short-term basis and that the EDC will strengthen the capacity for delivery of early childhood literacy programs. The *Stepping into the Future* has been administered by the Literacy Branch, Department of Education.


*Foundational Training in Family Literacy* - The Foundational Training in Family Literacy was first pursued in Alberta, where a training program was developed and implemented in 2000. While this is a national movement, the intent is that it impacts all provinces and territorities. The goal is to provide a standard knowledge base for stakeholders involved in family/early literacy. It can also be used as a resource for the development and delivery of family literacy programs. As several provinces had

identified a provincial training framework and strategy as critical to the effective development of family literacy, the idea of providing a common foundational base of training for practitioners who work in the field of family literacy resulted in a collaborative process involving authors from across the country, to build on the Alberta training resource and make it relevant for use in every province and territory of Canada. The first Foundational Training for Family Literacy Train-the-Trainer Institute was held in Nova Scotia in October 2001. At that week long session approximately 65 participants from five different regions across Canada received training, including representatives from Newfoundland and Labrador. The goal of the institute was for participants to train other practitioners in their own regions, giving them a common foundation in the theory and practice of family literacy. There was no follow up in this province.

*Ministerial Council for Early Childhood Learning* - In the 2004 Speech from the Throne and Budget 2004 the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, recognizing the far-reaching value of early education for young children, announced the establishment of a Ministerial Council for Early Childhood Learning. In a press release issued on May 17, 2004, announcing the recent approval of grants for early childhood/family literacy programs, the Education Minister John Ottenheimer stated that "the council will foster comprehensive programs across all government departments and agencies and will focus on the learning needs of children and their families."

At that time the minister indicated that he would be announcing further details on the Ministerial Council on Early Childhood Learning in the near future. An extensive search related to this topic failed to turn up any further information.

## Summary of Early Literacy/Family Literacy Support
## in Newfoundland and Labrador

Of the five "packaged" family literacy programs available for distribution in Newfoundland and Labrador, four of the programs - Books for Babies ®, NFLD, PRINTS, and SORT – were developed locally, and one - The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program – is part of a national program. The Books for Babies ® program is the only program supported by government to provide coordination at a provincial level. The other four programs are mainly promoted and offered on a volunteer and ad hoc basis.

There are four provincial organizations – the LDC, the Literacy Branch of the Department of Education, AECENL, and the Department of Health and Community Services - that include early literacy/family literacy within their mandate. Three of these organizations are affiliated with the Provincial Government.

A national movement for providing training for early literacy/family literacy workers - Foundational Training in Family Literacy – has not been followed up in this province. As well, The Ministerial Council for Early Childhood Learning has yet to be operationalized.

Overall, there is little visibility of any concerted movement in early literacy/family literacy in this province. There is no overall coordination and not much indication of collaboration. There is no provincial organization that has taken a leadership role in this area.

## Suggested Guidelines for Advancing Early Literacy/Family Literacy in Newfoundland and Labrador

*Family literacy is the beginning of lifelong literacy. It is the ground zero against which children measure everything else in their lives. Working with families is the most effective way of raising literacy levels.* (Mary Gordon, 2000)

There is no doubt that literacy stakeholders throughout Newfoundland and Labrador appreciate the significant roles that families play in literacy development in the early years. However, support for literacy development within families, during the critical early years, appears to be insufficient at this point. Efforts to address the needs in this area are scattered, often falling to individuals or groups within a particular community, many of whom are volunteers. This piecemeal attempt at support for family literacy has resulted in some areas of the province benefiting, while other areas go without. Along with the acknowledgment that literacy learning begins at birth and is influenced, supported and extended within the sociocultural context of the family, access to information and support for all "first teachers" of literacy is the next step.

As the two previous papers have demonstrated, literacy learning is a complex process, involving cultural practices and social conditions that embody family life. Viewed from the broadest of perspectives, a "one size fits all" approach to family literacy, is neither desirable nor feasible.

**Guidelines for Developing Early Literacy/Family Literacy Programs**

Through an examination of several current, comprehensive family literacy programs (see paper two for more information) the following criteria may serve as a guideline for the planning, implementing, and evaluating of effective family literacy programs:

*Age range* - Early literacy/family literacy programs should focus on families with children in the range from pre-birth to age six.

*Location* - The location where children are mainly involved in literacy activities is important. This may involve a combination of places where parents and children interact. The predominant setting should be the family home.

*School directed versus Home directed* - This distinguishes between programs based on preparing children for school versus programs which focus on a range of literacy activities existing in children's homes and building on these. Opportunities for literacy learning begin from birth, at home, and as such, the focus on preparing children for school is only a diminutive component of the "big literacy learning picture".

*Content* - Comprehensive programs reflecting the current understanding of emergent and early literacy learning should include age appropriate activities which focus on all aspects of literacy learning - listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, representing in other ways, and all literacy practices of the home and neighborhood.

*Facilitators* - The first and most effective facilitators of children's literacy

learning is the parent/caregiver. Many program facilitators work with parents/caregivers to support them in their role as first teachers.

*Program used at a specified time/space or in any life-space* - This distinguishes between literacy activities which take place in a particular setting at a specified time, versus those which can be incorporated into any life-space of a child. The "any life-space" concept supports the view that "all times are learning times" (Fagan, 2001). Programs that support this notion are more likely to encourage transfer of learning across multiple settings and activities.

*Books/materials provided* - Some programs supply books/materials for children and/or their parents. These books and materials should be culturally appropriate. In addition, providing incentives related to literacy activities may make this practice more meaningful for both parents and children.

*Training for Facilitators* - Training should include a mix of information and hands-on, interactive activities. Opportunities to "try out" activities, with support from program facilitators and other parents, often make them more meaningful and provide the encouragement needed to try them out at home.

*Sponsors the program* - Programs benefit from the sponsorship of groups/organizations, especially those that are well known and firmly established within a particular community.

*Internal program evaluations* - Feedback from both participants and program facilitators is very important in determining the effectiveness of a particular program and can also serve as a guide for continuing or modifying where necessary.

*External program evaluations* - Independent evaluations are an important component for determining effective programs. While most national and international family literacy programs submit to external evaluations, very few of the localized programs researched included external program evaluations.

*Research studies* - Conducting research studies of programs is reflective of the recognition, within the field of family literacy, that evaluation of initiatives are critical in determining effective practices.

*Source of funding* - Programs need sustained, long term funding. A combination of sources including public (mainly government grants) and private agencies (foundations, corporations, etc.) are needed to financially support such initiatives.

*Leadership and Coordination* – Leadership and coordination may occur within various provincial contexts. Early/family literacy programs that are already in operation may be coordinated by the parent organization, in ensuring that standards of training are implemented, materials are distributed, etc.

There is also a need for leadership at a pan-provincial level by organizations which do not provide a particular family/early literacy program. The Family Literacy Centre, Edmonton, Alberta is an example of such an organization. The Ministerial Council for Early Childhood Learning or the Association of Early Childhood Educators, Newfoundland and Labrador (AECENL) could be such an organization in this Province. The main function of these organizations would be to recommend standards of training for early/family literacy facilitators (this could be done in conjunction with the Centre for

Family Literacy which has proposed national standards), coordinate various groups in the province, including government departments/divisions that support early literacy, provide opportunities for provincial groups to get together and share/foster community action research projects, and promote various groups and organizations in the Province that provide hands-on service to family/early literacy stakeholders.

## Dissemination of Information

*The value of empowering parents with an understanding of early literacy development and ways to foster it means that they can make the most of all the experiences they have with their children. (*Fagan and Cronin, 1998)

The critical importance of the dissemination of information regarding early literacy/family literacy cannot be overstated. Even though this is a fairly new and emergent field within this province, the people most affected by the implications - the families of Newfoundland and Labrador - must have the information, sooner rather than later, to ensure that every child in this province has the opportunity to begin their literacy journey early in life.

Some scholars have suggested that creating an awareness of the critical early years of learning should begin at the high school level. By including all aspects of child development, including early literacy, in the high school curricula, future parents will have the opportunity to explore these important issues. Even those who may not be parents in the future will be exposed to young children through extended family and friends and therefore will benefit from the information.

An obvious time to provide parents with information related to early literacy is during pregnancy, possibly through the prenatal programs currently in existence in many regions of this province. Creating an awareness at this time may give expectant parents time to consider and discuss the issues before their child is born.

Another opportunity to provide information is through Public Health Clinics, where many parents bring their young children for regularly scheduled immunizations, beginning at two months of age. Some years ago, when I attended these clinics with my own infant children, a Public Health Nurse weighed and measured them, administered immunization needles, and spoke to me about the health and safety of my children. In my dual role as a new mother and an educator in the elementary school system, I was expecting someone to speak to me about the importance and benefits of talking and reading to my children. It never happened and when I questioned this I was told that it wasn't part of the program. To this day I believe that we are missing out on an opportunity to plant the seeds of literacy for babies and new parents through a partnership between health and education personnel.

Over the past few years, through various government sponsored media campaigns, many parents in this province have heard about the importance of reading to their young children. While research supports the fact that storybook reading contributes to early literacy success, as paper one of this folio demonstrated, there is so much more to literacy development than reading a book. Parents need to understand, not only the *what,* but perhaps more importantly, the *how* and the *why* of early literacy learning so that they can take advantage of the many opportunities that present themselves on a daily basis.

Providing this information to all parents, as early as possible in a child's life, will advantage many more children and set them on the road to success in life.

Family literacy is not about telling parents what to do. Acknowledging that parents are the first and most influential teachers of literacy for their children is the most important principle underlying any initiative to support families in early literacy development. Strengths-based models meet families where they are and, by creating an awareness of the many opportunities for literacy development that occur in the daily living activities that parents and children already participate in, validate the influence and significance of a child's first, best "teacher." As well, programs need to provide parents with suggestions and/or demonstrations on ways to extend literacy learning through a variety of age appropriate activities.

## Universal Access

The history of support for families worldwide has focused on those deemed "at risk" according to mainstream standards. Recently, these deficit-driven models have come under much criticism. Providing universal, voluntary access to programs and services may take away the stigmatizing of marginalized groups and, at the same time, provide more equal opportunities for all families. While many may argue that middle class families have access to resources and information to support their children, the changing dynamics and demands on family life - more single parent families, as well as two income families - has resulted in less time for parents to spend with their children. If

all parents understood the critical importance of the early years, perhaps the time that they do spend with their young children would be more meaningful.

All parents want the best for their children. Providing them with the information and support needed during the early years will contribute to the development of many more literate individuals in this province.

In 1989, long before the idea of family literacy reached this province, a Report of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Literacy titled *Literacy in a Changing Society: Policies, Perspectives, and Strategies for Newfoundland and Labrador,* acknowledged that, while remediation of illiteracy was important, it was not the solution. At that time the authors recognized that "it is critical to identify ways and means to prevent illiteracy in the first place" (p. 42). As well, the committee maintained that the responsibility for finding solutions to reducing illiteracy in the province rests, not only with government or educational institutions, but with society as a whole.

The *Strategic Literacy Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador (2000)* advocated a holistic approach to addressing literacy development along a continuum from early childhood on through different life stages. Leadership and cooperation among all stakeholders - learners, volunteers, community groups, and governments - was identified as necessary for achieving the goal of attaining literacy levels which are among the highest in Canada. Specifically, early literacy and the role of parents in nurturing and stimulating children from birth, were identified as key preventative/early intervention strategies.

# Conclusion

This paper has examined the current status of early literacy/family literacy in Newfoundland and Labrador. While various literacy stakeholders within the Province acknowledge that literacy learning begins at birth and is influenced, supported, and extended within the sociocultural context of the family, it appears that support for families during the critical early years is less than optimal. Currently, information and programs for families are only available on an ad hoc basis, and there is a definite lack of leadership and coordination among the many organizations and agencies responsible for early literacy/family literacy. Networking among these groups is crucial for the potential of early literacy/family literacy to be realized.

Support for all families during the early years of literacy development will ensure that many more children in this province will have the opportunity to begin their literacy learning journey early in life, and, consequently, enjoy the success available to literate persons in our society. A preventative/early intervention strategy such as this, would undoubtedly contribute to the Government's goal of raising the literacy levels of the people of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Support for families in the early years of literacy development, as a preventative measure, is long overdue.

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## General Conclusion

Literacy learning begins at birth through the voluminous opportunities for communication presented in the everyday experiences of life. In the early years of development, the first and most influential teachers of literacy is the family. Acknowledging and supporting all families in this pivotal role is necessary to ensure that all children have the opportunity to develop as literate persons.

The current understanding of the early years of development recognizes that language and literacy development begins at birth and is influenced, supported, and extended within the sociocultural context of the family throughout the preschool years. Within a multitude of settings and contexts, children are exposed to and participate in various implicit experiences which contribute to their literacy development. Explicitly, families can also promote literacy learning through the provision of developmentally appropriate activities and materials.

Acknowledging families as "first teachers" of literacy has lead to the family literacy movement; a complex, multifaceted field of study, which includes initiatives designed to support families in their all important role. While initial intervention models focused on deficits within families and communities outside of the mainstream, it is now recognized that the most effective practices are those based on existing strengths and are designed and implemented in collaboration with families and communities.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, recognition of the importance of cognitive development in the early years is a fairly recent phenomenon. While many literacy

stakeholders now acknowledge that families are the first and most significant teachers of early literacy learning, support for all families, in the form of information and programming, at present, is inadequate. It will take strong leadership and a coordinated effort, involving networking among the various organizations/agencies responsible for literacy, in order to advance early literacy/family literacy within the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Supporting families during the early years of literacy development will directly contribute to the goal of raising the literacy levels of the people of Newfoundland and Labrador. All children should be given the opportunity to begin their literacy learning journey early in life, within the context of a knowledgeable, understanding and supportive family.