

Family Literacy Reflections...

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Making the Case for Family Literacy Research

This issue

Making the Case for Family Literacy Research

Summary – *Challenges in Researching Family Literacy Programs*

by Vianne Timmons

AFLO 2006

Family Literacy in Ontario, Putting It on the Map!
Position E

Family Literacy in Ontario, Putting It on the Map! (OLC/AFLO 2006) and *Challenges in Researching Family Literacy Programs* (Timmons 2008) assert that research into family literacy is essential to:

- prove the efficacy of this field of practice
- identify program outcomes
- maintain continued development of quality programming and best practices.

See page 2.

For years family literacy practitioners have developed and provided family literacy programming because it makes sense. However, there has been very little research in the field to substantiate outcomes or guide best practice development.

Research is defined as “a systematic investigation and study of materials, sources, etc., in order to establish facts and reach conclusions.”

The Oxford Dictionary of Current English

Facts and information are needed. Researching what works, and what doesn't, will help us provide the best for our participants. We need facts about outcomes for students, facts about outcomes for families, facts about the best practice, facts about spending resources wisely, information from participants about making things work better for them and conclusions about how to change.

Question?

(See next page for answer.)

Do family literacy practitioners think research in family literacy is important?

Kingston Literacy & Skills (KL&S) received project funding from the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) in August 2009 for *Building Family Literacy and Essential Skills: Foundation for Social Inclusion*.

KL&S has run various family literacy programs for more than 20 years. Most recently we have developed a family literacy curriculum called **UPP** or **U**psgrading for **P**arents with **P**reschoolers.

The main components of *Building Family Literacy and Essential Skills: Foundation for Social Inclusion* are to:

- **Fund** the **UPP** program at three different community based literacy programs in Ontario: one urban, one rural and one culturally responsive
- **Develop** an online course based on the UPP curriculum for literacy students who are parents
- **Research** the outcomes of the UPP program.

Check it out.

The UPP curriculum can be found online, under “training” at www.familyliteracyexpertise.org. UPP will evolve during the project as conclusions are made regarding the information and research results.

Are you interested?

As part of *Building Family Literacy and Essential Skills: Foundation for Social Inclusion*, two literacy programs in Ontario will be funded between October 2010 and March 2011, to provide **UPP** for students who are parents. Application procedures will be prepared and distributed soon.

Do you want to provide a family literacy program at your literacy centre? Here is an opportunity to do so with funding available for the programs that are successful in the application process.

Research will take place. UPP program participants will be pre- and post-tested and they will fill out a couple of short questionnaires.

The Chicken or the Egg – Which Came First?

Challenges in Researching Family Literacy Programs

Vianne Timmons, University of Prince Edward Island

Canadian Psychology, 2008, Vol. 49, No. 2, 96-102

“Family literacy programs have the potential to positively influence a family’s future. Unfortunately, investment in these programmes is sparse because research evidence is lacking. There is indication of the potential to improve families’ literacy habits through family literacy programmes, but more research is necessary to enhance and sustain them. However, various challenges exist when researching family literacy programmes.”

Challenges in Researching Family Literacy Programs

For many years funding has been available for a lot of research to try to understand how we learn to read and to learn what supports are needed to help people become literate and confident learners. Through research we now know that parents play a key role in helping their pre-school children develop emergent literacy skills. Parents help their children by talking and listening, reading and discussing children’s books and playing games that highlight knowledge about the alphabet and print in general with them.

Research has also shown that children whose parents have low literacy skills often have difficulty attaining high literacy levels. Children who encounter early literacy difficulty continue to struggle throughout their school years and fall further and further behind their peers. Personal and family literacy struggles cycle through generations. To change the cycle, parents and other family members need to become more involved in and have more knowledge about their children’s literacy development so they are able to support it.


It makes sense then, that programs which offer parents the opportunity to upgrade their literacy skills and encourage parents’ efforts to help their children learn, might work to positively change forever this challenging literacy cycle. Many community-based literacy organizations have developed family literacy programs precisely because of this logical premise.

Family literacy funding is usually only available on a project basis or through fundraising. This kind of funding structure does not provide the sustainability necessary to support strong and consistent program evaluation or more in-depth research.

There has been very little research, therefore, about family literacy programming and its effects. And since there has been little research, funders are reluctant to provide support to family literacy programs.

In addition to the concerns mentioned above, Timmons discusses other challenges that researchers face when designing family literacy program investigations. This discussion includes the variety of program curriculums, the different funding and organizational design of programs, differing definitions of family, challenges in recruitment and retention of families, ensuring authentic participation and working with diverse populations.

It would seem that family literacy programs have good potential to positively influence parents’ and children’s low literacy rates, unemployment or underemployment and poverty. We just need to prove it.

 AFLO Action for Family Literacy Ontario
Position Paper 2006 Family Literacy in Ontario, Putting It on the Map!
Position E The development of a professional family literacy field requires support for research and field development.
Key Recommendation Invest in family literacy research and field development.
Some Key Recommended Actions <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fund research in the field of family literacy to help build the family literacy community of practice.• Fund both academic research and research generated by family literacy practitioners.

Answer YES Practitioners in the field agree.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support research and development with sufficient funding and an initial focus on models and approaches to integrate programming of adult and child literacy.
<i>From: The State of Family Literacy in Ontario – Results of a Provincial Survey (OLC/AFLO 2006, page</i>