



# Learning from The Weaving Literacy Project

A report on the process and outcomes of the *Weaving Literacy* project

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the *Weaving Literacy* Project

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with contributions from  
Leona Gadsby and John Malcolmson



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Learning from the Weaving Literacy Project:  
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By Suzanne Smythe  
With contributions from Leona Gadsby and John Malcolmson

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# INTRODUCTION



## What is the *Weaving Literacy* project?

The *Weaving Literacy* project is a multi-year collaboration between the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada – [www.frp.ca](http://www.frp.ca)) and the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL – [www.literacy.ca](http://www.literacy.ca)). With financial support from the National Literacy Secretariat of the Human Resources and Skills Development of Canada (HRSDC), the project brought together literacy organizations and family resource groups from 22 communities across Canada to develop and implement a literacy plan in participating communities.

In this report, you will read about the principles supporting integrated approaches to literacy, the *Weaving Literacy* project design, its outcomes and the issues that emerged from this work. The report concludes with recommendations for sustaining and deepening links between literacy and community-building in Canadian communities.

The *Weaving Literacy* project takes its inspiration from the work of literacy groups such as the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL), the Northwest Territories (NWT) and Nunavut Literacy Councils, Parenting for a Literate Community, and others who have adopted a collaborative, community-building approach to literacy.

The primary goals of the *Weaving Literacy* project were to build on these collaborative practices, extend them to new communities, and develop resources and an infrastructure to train, support and sustain integrated, community-building approaches to literacy across the Canada.

The *Weaving Literacy* project was run by a team that included a project manager, responsible for the day to day work of the project and writing project materials, an administrative assistant who helped to communicate with teams, facilitators responsible for running regional training events and a project evaluator. A project coordinator organized travel and accommodation, had responsibility for financial management of the project and coordinated the production of project materials.

The *Weaving Literacy* project benefited from the guidance of a national Advisory Committee. Its diverse membership included the perspectives of adult learners, literacy organizations and family support organizations.

## Project history

The *Weaving Literacy* project came into being amidst growing research that confirmed the importance of family and community contexts for the development of literacy skills and abilities in young children. Literacy initiatives which are developed at local levels and in settings that serve a variety of community and family needs are well placed to support and build upon family and community literacies. Family support programs, which are community-based centres that support young families in a variety of ways, are natural settings for such literacy initiatives.

In fact, work that preceded the current project included the publication of *Weaving Literacy into Family and Community Life Resource Guide* in 2000. This resource guide was written for family support programs that were interested in integrating literacy into their work with families. The guide emphasized an integrated approach that placed literacy within the broad web of services that family support programs typically offer. It introduced the family support field to the work of literacy organizations, and featured case studies of literacy collaborations across the country that met the needs of young families in community-based settings. One of the key findings of this phase of the project was that literacy organizations and family support groups have natural connections: they share an ethos of respect for the knowledge and skills of community members and use these as resources for further learning. They also share a commitment to positive social change and link their education work to this goal. Literacy is an integral part of this work.

Originally, the *Weaving Literacy into Family and Community Life Resource Guide* was published in English only, in the belief that Francophone literacy and family support organizations in Canada would prefer to develop French language resources that reflected their unique circumstances. However, in response to positive feedback and requests for the publication from Francophone individuals and organizations within and outside of Québec, the resource guide was adapted into French in 2003 with the financial support of the National Literacy Secretariat.

The second phase of *Weaving Literacy* project continued this work. It aimed to build on the natural connections between literacy organizations and family support groups by supporting the development of locally-based collaborations linking these two fields, but also including other community partners with the goal of creating a community-wide vision for literacy. An ethos of asset-based community building guided this second stage, in keeping with the values shared by these organizations.

## Objectives of the Weaving Literacy project

- To develop a framework for linking literacy and community building that recognizes the strengths and diversity of communities
- To develop resource materials and a training guide to support ongoing community literacy planning
- To identify practices that support an integrated approach to literacy
- To identify issues that present barriers to integrated, community-building approaches to literacy



## What is an integrated, community-building approach to literacy?

An integrated, community-building approach to literacy education is one in which literacy learning is valued both inside and outside formal school, and is seen as embedded in socially and culturally meaningful activity. Just as definitions of “what counts” as literacy are becoming broader and more diverse, so too are the methods of “delivering” literacy education. Literacy groups are finding that embedding or integrating literacy into existing activities, projects and family and community interests not only makes literacy work more sustainable, it also makes sense from a pedagogic point of view.

### Literacy learning in context

Research shows that people learn new literacy skills best when these literacy skills are integrated in meaningful learning and everyday texts. Reading to children, getting a driver’s license, putting together a radio program, finding and advocating for affordable housing, looking for work, and participating in the religious and cultural life of one’s community are all contexts for literacy learning (Eldred, 2005).

Rather than assuming that community members cannot participate in these activities until they develop the required literacy skills, an asset-based approach to literacy holds that people can learn as they engage in these practices, with the support of those who are more experienced. This has two important implications for integrated literacy approaches.

The first is that when community settings are recognized as places of learning, the need to “reach the hard to reach” or see family and community members as somehow “deficient” falls away. Jan Eldred, Senior Development Officer, NIACE (National Institute for Adult and Community Education, United Kingdom), expresses this in the following way:

Isn't it rather that services in which [people] might be interested are hard to reach? If people don't know what's available and what they might gain from an activity they aren't going to come running forward. It's up to us to take the information, indicate what's in it for them, remove any barriers and generally promote and advocate adult learning...meeting people where they are, in territory they feel comfortable in, supported with such things as childcare, at times which suit their situation, begins to address the challenge...working in partnership with agencies and organizations which are already in contact with people means that those who were perceived as 'hard to reach' are suddenly there as the natural constituents of the partner organization. (Eldred, 2005, 2)

The second important implication for integrated practice is that for community members, developing literacy skills is often not the main goal for engaging in learning. Literacy initiatives are often most successful when they are embedded in other forms of learning of interest to families and community members. In her review of literacy and language collaborations around the world, Elsa Auerbach found that,

Case studies of literacy collaborations suggest that the way to promote language/literacy goals may be not by focusing directly on language and literacy, but rather by focusing on community-based activities identified by participants. [R]igid adherence to predetermined goals may actually undermine the efficacy of a partnership. (Auerbach, 2002, 4)

These views do not suggest that stand-alone literacy programs are not important and necessary, rather that literacy learning can and does take place in a variety of settings. Communities that provide many opportunities for learning are therefore providing many opportunities for learning new literacy skills.

### A “whole community” approach

An integrated, community-building approach takes a long-term, holistic view of literacy and learning as connected to other community issues. It prompts a “whole community” perspective on issues that shape literacy learning opportunities, on the premise that literacy is not only the concern of literacy organizations, but permeates the work of all community groups and is embedded in the fabric of community life. This “whole community” approach is in evidence when community organizations come together to not just promote their own programs and projects, but those of other groups as well.

## Literacy and social issues

As participants in the *Weaving Literacy* project made clear, literacy issues come into play when families are isolated, when there are barriers to participation in community life, when families are forced to move each month to avoid high rents, and when parents do not earn enough to feed their children or access community programs. When community groups recognize how the quality of family life and learning opportunities shape literacy acquisition, they can work together to address these issues in powerful ways.

## Expanding opportunities for learning

The core idea underpinning an integrated, community-building approach to literacy and participation is that the more community members engage in meaningful learning in their communities, the more opportunities they have to develop their literacy skills and learn new ones.

What practices are associated with this approach? As the outcomes of the *Weaving Literacy* project suggest, an integrated, community-building approach to literacy does not necessarily mean the development of a new literacy program, or more literacy classes, or the rolling out of a new literacy model across a province or territory. Although these are possibilities, the *Weaving Literacy* approach involves building a cooperative environment among community groups, agencies and community members for addressing literacy, learning and family quality of life issues in a holistic way. This places community groups and community members in the driver's seat for deciding what kinds of literacy and learning initiatives are most needed in their communities.

Integrated, community-building approaches to literacy can incorporate many elements or approaches, including the following:

- Creating opportunities for people to come together to learn about things that are important to them, to share ideas and to develop networks
- Linking literacy and learning to existing community activities and projects where people already feel comfortable and have few barriers to participation
- “Pulling out” the opportunities for literacy and for community-building within these existing community activities and projects
- Collaborating with, not competing with, other community groups when setting up new projects or applying for new funding
- Seeing the community as a whole and working to reduce institutional barriers to the services and supports people need

- Encouraging all community groups to see their work as connected to literacy, even though they may not “teach” literacy directly
- Valuing and promoting literacy outside of formal schooling as a key to supporting a “learning community”
- Seeing all community members as having literacy knowledge and interests that benefit the community, rather than emphasizing a “lack” of literacy skills



## What is the role of community-based literacy planning in an integrated approach to literacy?

In forging an integrated, community-building approach to literacy, sometimes a straight exchange of services and expertise between literacy organizations and community groups works well if groups already know each other and have some sense of the learning needs of the people with whom they work. But sometimes a longer-term, holistic approach to literacy is required. This is where community planning comes in.

Participants in the *Weaving Literacy* project and other communities using a long term planning approach, such as the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy in the East and West Kootenays of BC, cited the following reasons for engaging in community literacy planning:

“We don’t have the resources to offer stand-alone literacy programs.”

“We are getting tired of doing one short-term project after another. We want to be able to trace the long-term impact of our work and to have a broader picture of what is happening in the community.”

“Individuals and families in our community have diverse literacy and learning interests—we don’t have the expertise to meet these interests on our own.”

“We are not reaching out to the people we want to reach out to.”

“There is competition among groups doing similar work. This leads to gaps, duplication and overlap, and it isn’t fair to the community that gets caught in the middle.”

“The deeper, longer-term issues facing our communities are too big for one group to take on alone, or for “one-off” projects to address. We need to work together.”

“Fragmenting services leads to institutional barriers that are not in the interest of individuals, families and the community.”

## Literacy organizations and family support programs: natural connections

As noted above, literacy organizations and family support programs share important commonalities that helped facilitate the collaborative activities required by the project. Both tend to be community-oriented, participant-focused, asset-based and flexible in their ability to respond to the needs of the people they serve. Both tend to have informal ways of operating and strong grassroots connections. These attributes predispose both sectors to move “outside the box” of accepted ways of doing things.

The asset-based philosophy shared by both literacy organizations and family resource programs was expressed as a set of shared principles guiding daily practice in both sectors. These principles proved relevant for guiding the community literacy planning process.

### Principles guiding family support, literacy work and community planning

- Have confidence that individuals are able to find their own solutions
- Value and model reciprocity, the mutual exchange of ideas and support
- Promote social transformation
- Promote the rights of citizenship and participation in civil society
- Advocate for the essentials for quality of life

The following section describes in more detail the project design and activities.

# PROJECT DESIGN & ACTIVITIES



## Linking literacy, family support and community-building

In the original design of the *Weaving Literacy* project, the project team proposed that staff members from various family support programs across the country be recruited to attend a national training workshop in order to learn more ways to integrate literacy into their programs. Individuals from literacy organizations were to be involved as workshop trainers and to provide support and resources to assist literacy initiatives in family resource centres following the training.

The first Advisory Committee meeting for the project took place in March of 2004. After considerable discussion, a consensus emerged that the project plan should reflect more closely the principles and practices of an integrated, community building approach to literacy. The new project design ensured that literacy organizations would be directly involved as partners in the development of literacy initiatives from the beginning. The following points summarize the changes that were made to the project design in order to better reflect integrated and community-building principles.

### Modification to original project design

- Involve literacy organizations as full members of the literacy collaborations from the beginning, rather than as resource people to support the integration of literacy in family support settings.
- Broaden the focus of the training from specific strategies for integrating literacy into family resource centres to a community-wide vision and strategy for literacy in each community.
- Keep the resources for training as close to the communities as possible. Instead of one national training event, hold five regional training sessions and adjust the plan so that a staff member from a literacy organization and a family resource centre could attend the training together, as a *Weaving Literacy* team
- Recognize that the work of building collaborations, planning and implementing literacy strategies is real work, not work that can be done “off the side of a desk”. Allocate money that had previously been budgeted for resource persons and mentor trainers to provide each team with \$3000 to put toward the time and costs of their planning work and whatever activities or events arose from the implementation of their plans.

## Recruiting community participants

Information about the project and about the regional training events was distributed widely in both English and French to both family support and literacy organizations. The response was very positive and exceeded the number of spaces available.

Selection of community practitioners was based on the following criteria:

- Participants worked in communities that reflected the diversity of family and community life in Canada
- Participants hailed from as many regions in Canada as possible
- Participants reflected in particular rural and remote communities who often do not have access to training and resources
- Participants demonstrated an interest and commitment to community-building and collaboration.

## Finding literacy “dates”

As a result of the new design, staff from family resource centres that had already been selected for the project needed to scramble to find a literacy “date” to invite to the regional training event, someone with whom they could work on a literacy collaboration. This scramble was in itself a rewarding process. At this point, some family resource staff did not know of any literacy organizations in their communities, or they were not sure what a literacy organization was. This provided an opportunity for *Weaving Literacy* project staff to make introductions and initiate new relationships where none had pre-existed.

In a few situations, family resource staff had difficulties finding a literacy organization that had the capacity to collaborate with them. Sometimes it was necessary to “make the case” for the importance of integrated and collaborative literacy work. The fact that some literacy groups, though very supportive of the approach, did not have the capacity to do this work, had to be acknowledged. In the majority of situations, however, family resource staff already knew their local literacy group in some capacity and had already enjoyed a collaborative relationship of some kind, so the choice for a literacy “date” was an easy one.

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## Regional workshops

Between May and September, 2004, regional planning workshops were held in Toronto (Central region), Vancouver (Pacific region), Fredericton (Atlantic region), Edmonton (Prairie region) and Montréal (for Francophone communities in Quebec, and Francophone minority communities outside Quebec). In all, 22 *Weaving Literacy* teams attended regional training events.

Of all the teams that participated in the *Weaving Literacy* project, 16 were from rural communities and small towns and six were from middle to large urban centres.

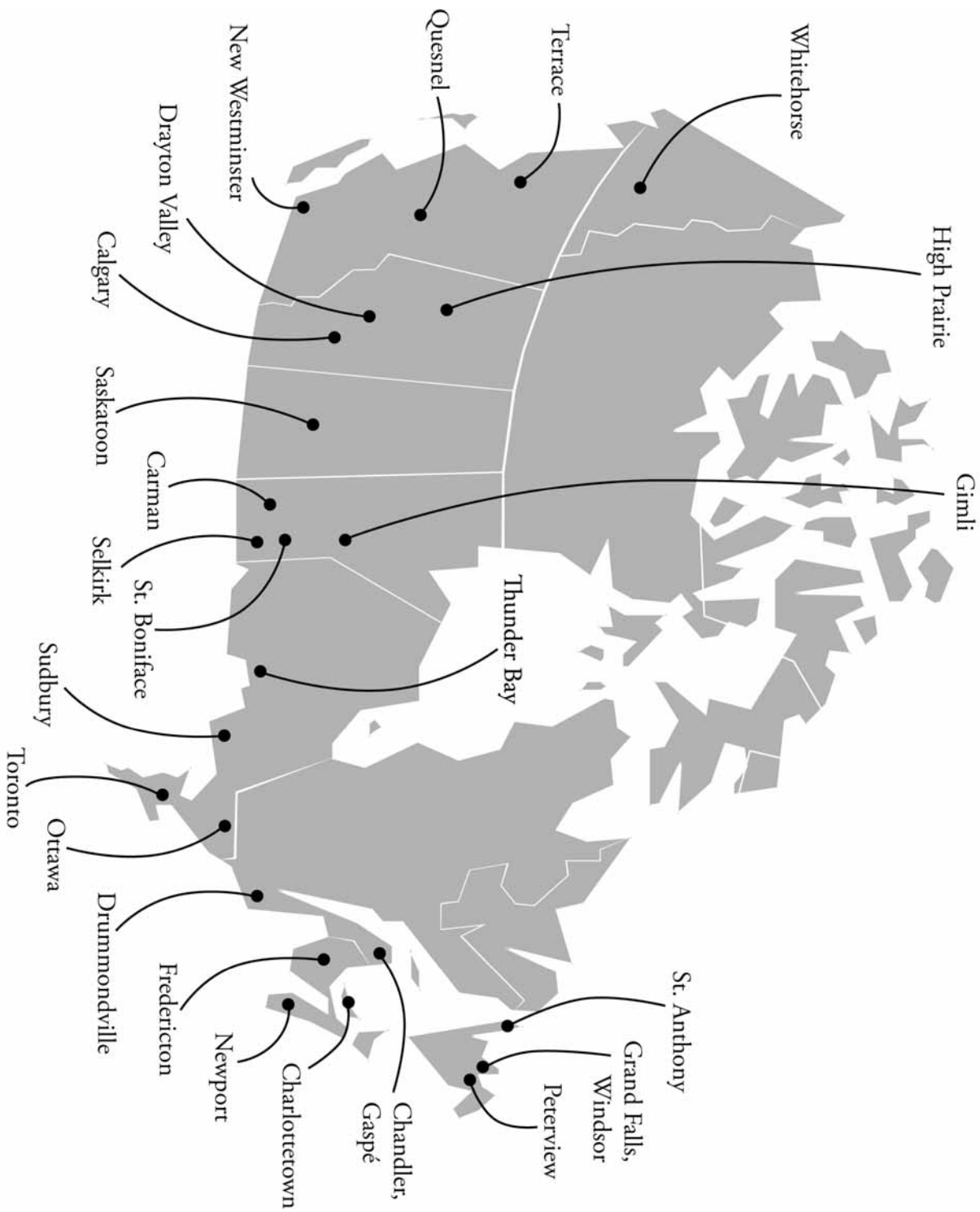
- two were from minority Francophone communities
- two were from majority Francophone communities
- three were based in new immigrant communities
- three were based in First Nations communities
- 12 were based in Anglophone majority communities serving low and middle income families, First Nations communities, and new immigrants

The map on the facing page shows the communities that participated in the project.

### Aims of the planning workshops

- Build connections between the work of literacy organizations and the work of community-based family support and other community groups
- Identify how literacy is embedded in the work of diverse family resource centres, community agencies and community settings
- Share and learn about the diverse contexts for literacy in communities
- Share and learn about collaborative and community building approaches to literacy
- Learn skills and approaches for strategic planning
- Develop a literacy plan for each community or team that reflects community building values

# Weaving Literacy Communities, 2004 – 2005



## Steps in the planning process

“The most successful part of our plan was to hook into what was already going on in the community. We are not rock stars, we don’t need a stand alone gig.”

The *Weaving Literacy* project adopted a community literacy planning process that had been developed by Gavin Perryman, an organizational consultant from Perryman and Associates in Vancouver, BC, and used by the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL). After adapting the planning process at each training event, the following approach was developed:<sup>1</sup>

- Step 1: Identify community strengths and issues
- Step 2: Build relationships among community groups
- Step 3: Map literacy assets
- Step 4: Create a community vision for literacy
- Step 5: Identify priorities and opportunities
- Step 6: Develop a focused and manageable literacy action plan for each *Weaving Literacy* community

Following an asset-based, community building approach to literacy planning, each team was encouraged to develop a literacy plan based on where their respective organizations and communities were “at” in terms of their organizational capacity, the climate for collaborative work in their community, and the literacy priorities they identified.

A key benefit of the planning sessions was the opportunity for community groups to discuss trends and issues in literacy, family life, policy and funding that shape their work. While each community was different, there were many similarities in the issues that community-based agencies experienced. For example, as part of the literacy planning process, groups first discussed the “big picture” of what was going on in their communities. They identified things they loved about their communities that they could build on in their literacy planning, as well as issues that worried them and could possibly be addressed, at least in part, by community literacy planning.

Almost every *Weaving Literacy* team across the country said that one thing they loved about their community was the way that people care for one another and come together in a crisis. And every team said that they were worried about the growing gaps between rich and poor and the increase in “invisible” poverty.

“We can’t support parenting, literacy or schooling if people are hungry and don’t have a stable roof over their heads.”

Some common concerns and frustrations were striking. Participants in each regional training event emphasized the need for a broad-based social movement to address poverty and social exclusion and the need for more respect on the part of governments and funding agencies for the work of community-based agencies in keeping families and communities healthy and cohesive.



Planning for community literacy is fun. France Francoeur of the Centre Alpha Roger Percé, and Jacques Roy of the Maison de la Famille Contre Vents et Marées, of Chandler, Gaspésie, at the regional training session in Montréal, September, 2004



This is a community-asset map developed by Prema Ladchumanopaskeran and Beth Mulloy, the Whitehorse *Weaving Literacy* team members

## Participant feedback about the regional planning workshops

“As a literacy provider who works primarily with young children, I feel that the training that I received through the *Weaving Literacy* project helped to broaden my understanding of the breadth of literacy. Meeting with other teams fostered ideas and created an energy that I was able to bring back to my community.”

“My views have changed. I first thought that the training event was lacking in direction. Now I see that if it had been more directive it would have changed the direction of people’s plans and change the community development aspect of the project.”

Through training evaluation forms, a review of action plans developed by teams and follow-up phone surveys, participants expressed the view that training had played an important role in energizing their participation in the project. They also saw the training as key to developing a more in-depth understanding of what it means to weave literacy, and to developing and refining literacy plans that could bring this vision to life within their communities.

The mid-term evaluation of the project summarized the feedback about the training this way:

- 90 per cent of participants said that the training either had given them valuable exposure to people and ideas, had enhanced their knowledge of their partner’s field or had opened the door to a greater perception of the possibilities and potential for weaving literacy
- 85 per cent of participants reported increased awareness and skill development in the areas of exposure to new perspectives on integrated literacy, planning and strategizing abilities and knowledge of community level resources to support the project
- 88 per cent of participants reported the potential for improved community-level relationships including having contact and communication with others doing similar work, and building trust and collaborations
- Close to 80 per cent of participants said that they felt they had either a more holistic or more appropriate vision of how to proceed, or that ideas they had brought to the training had been validated and extended



## “Organized chaos” – Supporting local diversity within a national structure

Following an asset-based philosophy, the *Weaving Literacy* coordinating team did not stipulate, beyond the original literacy-family resource collaboration, which additional organizations or sectors the *Weaving Literacy* teams should engage in their communities. Nor did the project staff place strict time frames on when each team needed to carry out the steps of their plan or how they needed to spend their money. This made it possible for teams to put principles of integrated literacy into practice by looking for opportunities to integrate their literacy planning objectives into existing community activities and events and to build relationships with people and organizations when the timing was right. Teams allocated their \$3,000 stipend in ways dictated by their particular situations. They used the money to cover staffing costs, and/or the development or purchase of new resources, space rental, child care, conference materials and so on.

This “context-driven” approach to supporting plans in local communities was balanced by a national structure for supporting and reporting the process of implementing literacy plans. This balance between local diversity and a national structure can be described as “organized chaos.”

The national structure for the *Weaving Literacy* project involved supports to teams, a time frame to complete the work, requirements for reporting and invoicing and a means for *Weaving Literacy* teams across the country to communicate with one another.

### Supports offered to *Weaving Literacy* teams:

- A community literacy planning guide
- A three-day residential training workshop on approaches to planning for community literacy
- \$3,000 stipend for each team to implement their plan
- Follow-up group teleconferences, e-mail and telephone support and “check-ins”
- Letters of support, assistance with problem-solving and assistance with finding resources
- Visits to *Weaving Literacy* events and projects by the coordinating team where possible
- Project list-serv
- A national *Weaving Literacy* gathering bringing teams together to share experiences and reflect on learning from the project (made possible with additional funding sought during the project and provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada).

## Flexibility within structure: A beginning, a middle, and an end

While there was much flexibility for how each team carried out its literacy plan, it was nevertheless important for the teams and for the collective work of the project to mark a beginning, middle and end to the individual plans.

The regional training events in the spring and summer of 2004, the implementation process during the winter and spring of 2005 and the national gathering for *Weaving Literacy* teams in May of 2005 provided a loose but important frame for guiding 22 diverse projects, spread across the country, along a common path leading to completion. Even though many of the projects and processes that began during the *Weaving Literacy* project will continue, it was useful to have some closure to this phase, with an opportunity for each team to reflect on its accomplishments and to share what they learned with others. The mid-term reflections provided an opportunity to monitor the progress of each team's plans during their implementation.

## Mid-way reflections

As noted above, each team was allocated \$3,000 to support its literacy plans. Each team was asked to fill in and send to the project manager a reflection sheet, documenting its progress in implementing its plan, together with an invoice for up to half of their total stipend. Most teams completed their reflection and received their first instalment between one and four months after the regional training event they attended.

Toward the completion of their plans, teams submitted a brief summary report of their activities, an evaluation of the *Weaving Literacy* project and an invoice for the balance of the stipend owing to them. The information provided in the mid-way reflections proved invaluable by informing the project manager of any particular supports or resources teams needed, so they could be provided to teams on a "just in time" basis. For example, when several teams said they needed more documentation about the *Weaving Literacy* project to give to community groups, the project team developed posters and pamphlets about the project in English and French and distributed them to everyone.

The interim reports also helped track the overall success of the project and identify adjustments that were necessary. For example, the project adjusted the expectation that each team hold a community-wide literacy planning event in the recognition that not all communities were ready for such an event, some communities already had planning initiatives underway that could be tapped into, and many teams did not have the capacity to stage such an event. Nevertheless, many teams did hold very successful community events, which are included in the summary of literacy action plan outcomes on pages 30-33.

Excerpts from these mid-way reflections provide insights into the kinds of supports teams needed, and the ways in which original action plans shifted in response to local contexts.

“The introduction of the *Ready, Set, Learn* initiative in our community meant that we didn’t want to recreate a program that was already about to be implemented so we decided to join forces and work to plan and implement the events together, meeting our mandate and theirs.”

“Please keep the ideas and updates flowing. Keeping us on top of what has been happening in your world of literacy has provided us with strength to venture into some unknown territory for us.”



## National gathering

The desire for all the *Weaving Literacy* teams to be able to gather together to share their experiences and learn from one another was identified during the regional training workshops. Resources for this gathering and for the concurrent training of 24 community practitioners from organizations which are funded by the *Community Action Program for Children* and the *Canada Pre-Natal Nutrition Program* was provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada. The event was held in May, 2005, one year after the first regional training event. This gathering provided a natural closure to the implementation phase of the *Weaving Literacy* project.

Teams from across the country came together to share their plans and meet participants from across the country. This conference provided an authentic and meaningful way for teams to report on the outcomes of their literacy action plans and to take some much needed time away from the pressure of their day-to-day work to reflect on their future plans. The themes and issues surrounding integrated and community-building approaches to literacy that were identified during this national conference are described in more detail on pages 22-28.

## Bringing it all together

The following comments from *Weaving Literacy* team members provide insight into some reasons for the project’s success:

“We needed the money provided for our time and community projects, and the freedom to develop and plan our own project. We did not plan to do the book bags, this came up later after talking with parents and community agencies, but this was a major success of our plan.”

“Two of the most important and useful supports that this project offered were the training event in Fredericton and financial support to get things started. The time to meet in Fredericton to share ideas, build action plans and germinate seeds was very valuable, as was the ongoing contact throughout the year, the ongoing encouragement and the validation that what we care about is also important to others, and others share our passion.”

“During the project I gained an awareness of literacy that I didn’t have before and now bring to all of the work that I do, especially the links to social justice considerations.”

“My *Weaving Literacy* partner and I want to continue the conversations about literacy and ways to weave it into what we do in our respective roles (family resource centres, justice, school district, health authorities, provincial departments of education).”

“As the collaboration process was so successful, it encouraged me to think in a more collaborative way with all of the programs that I provide.”



The common history of literacy and family resource movement: a time line developed by the Saskatoon *Weaving Literacy* team, Bev Digout and Mavis McPhee

## LESSONS LEARNED & EMERGING THEMES



### Factors that influence the success of community literacy planning

Taking the experiences of all 22 literacy plans together, there were common factors that shaped the success of literacy planning and implementation processes.

- **The history of inter-agency collaboration in the community:** When relationships were fairly new or there were existing tensions that needed to be negotiated, more work was dedicated to building trust and common principles than with developing and implementing new initiatives. This important but less visible work needs to be taken into account when evaluating the progress of literacy planning and implementation.
- **The geography and population of the community:** It was sometimes more difficult to forge new collaborations in big centres than in small communities. However, small and rural communities were affected by high staff turnover and the need to travel large distances to connect with organizations and families.
- **The level of commitment and the capacity of each team member's organization to support collaborative work:** If an organization was not fully supportive of its staff member's participation in the project, the work tended to not get done or the stress on staff members was high.
- **The level of funding for literacy and family support organizations in each community:** When these were very unequal, or when funding for both groups was scarce and/or intermittent, the planning and implementation work stalled or reflected the interests of one group more than the other.
- **The rules surrounding funding:** If these were targeted and inflexible, it was difficult to develop plans that reflected community issues and needs. Sometimes plans reflected the priorities of funding agencies instead, but most often teams were able to find creative ways around this.
- **The impact of individual personalities:** There is no getting past the fact that individual personalities play a key role in promoting or scuttling collaborative work. Establishing principles to guide collaborative work can help to moderate the effects that personalities might have on the process.

## Practices supporting success of literacy action plans

According to the *Weaving Literacy* teams, the following practices contributed to the success of their plans:

- Taking time to celebrate successes and family and community life
- Involving learners, families, community members in discussing literacy issues and community plans
- Joining forces with (or supporting, rather than competing against) family literacy initiatives that already exist or “spring up” during the implementation process
- For new relationships, starting small and doing something soon, and simple, with your partner to build trust and momentum; then moving into wider planning
- Taking time to lay out your principles and values with your partners
- Taking time to study and learn about what your community’s needs and aspirations are in relation to literacy—don’t assume you know what they are
- Doing the necessary legwork required to inventory local resources and assets—human, material and organizational—that might be used to address literacy needs and challenges



## Themes and issues in integrated approaches to literacy

The mid-way reflections, evaluations, teleconferences and group work with Elsa Auerbach during the national *Weaving Literacy* gathering in May of 2005 generated themes and issues related to integrated literacy and the work of this project. These speak to the inner workings of collaborative work and integrated approaches to literacy. What we have learned in this project may provide insight for other literacy and community-building initiatives.

### Working conditions: literacy and family support as “women’s work”

Participants in the *Weaving Literacy* project frequently mentioned lack of time as a significant challenge in implementing their action plan, as reflected in the following comments:

"It's a challenge to meet and plan because of busy schedules."

"I worked extra hours and found January very busy planning for National Family Literacy Day and the *Weaving Literacy* workshop."

"Our *Weaving Literacy* workshops took place in the evening and if it took me away from my workplace, I took a vacation day without pay. I work thirty-five hours a week in a program, so it is hard to leave without a replacement."

"I have a seven year old child and the travel can be upsetting, along with my work schedule which is a bit rushed at times."

Time and money constraints are so common to community work that it almost seems cliché to list these as significant challenges to building sustainable integrated literacy initiatives. Indeed, they have almost become "taken-for-granted" as conditions of community-based education work. But in considering the issue closely, it becomes clear that "lack of time and insufficient funds" isn't just about the need to find yet more ways to do more with less. It is really about the working conditions for people who do community-based education and family support work.

At the national *Weaving Literacy* gathering in May 2005, participants pointed out that community-based literacy work and family support work is carried out almost entirely by women. Society's attitude is that caring, relationship-building and networking is part of what women do and is "not real work".

Forty-two of the 44 participants in the *Weaving Literacy* project were women. Most had full-time jobs. Community literacy planning and collaboration was, for a few, part of their job descriptions, but for most, it was something they did "off the side of their desks" as a result of the care and commitment they had for their community. The \$3000 provided to each team by the project was designed to recognize their efforts to support literacy as "real work." Team members said that they would not have had the time or resources to carry out the planning and implementation work in this project if the money had not been available.

If the fruits of community-building work are considered worthwhile, the work of planning and collaboration that produces these all important "deliverables" cannot depend on the benevolence of community workers, most of whom are women with multiple job roles, family responsibilities and salaries that in many cases are below what is considered a "living wage."

## Collaborating across sectors

The issue of collaboration had a practical importance in the *Weaving Literacy* project because it demonstrated that by itself each sector lacked the full range of skill, experience and connection to the community that was required to fully integrate literacy within community settings. As one of the team members noted in an interview,

“The collaborations have enabled both energy and thought to come together to create new ideas. Often one organization cannot bring that perspective to the very complex set of needs and realities of the people they work with.”

Collaboration was described as an activity that was “not about staying within organizations.” These ideas underlined the need to see collaborative relationship in support of weaving literacy as an exercise in community development where the end product amounts to more than the respective contributions made by participating organizations. In a general way, this idea represents the culmination of many different experiences of project participants.

Indeed, comments from the *Weaving Literacy* participants suggest that the training they participated in, together with the experience of implementing their literacy action plans, contributed to a transformation in their practice. While many participants already adhered to community-building values in their work, they reported that the project broadened their views of literacy, honed their planning skills and provided them with new perspectives on the intersections of literacy, family support and community development. The ongoing opportunities for reflection and discussion with other community groups also reduced the sense of isolation that community-based workers can sometimes experience.

When asked questions about their plans, participants from the family support sector spoke of a need to reassess the way they approached literacy programming in their interactions with families. On the other side of the collaboration, literacy practitioners spoke of the need to extend the reach of their work into existing family-serving networks in efforts to connect with the “hard to reach.”

An interesting aspect of this dynamic is the fact that both family support programs and literacy organizations had similar perspectives on the need to re-examine critically the nature of their practice. This sharing of perspective confirmed the potential that exists for community-level collaborations of the type brought into play by the *Weaving Literacy* project to change practice for the better.

However, collaboration processes sometimes met with difficulties. One team member said:

“One difficulty is the belief that one agency may have more or less power than the other, that one agency has to give up more than the other agency...”

Of the 22 teams who came together for this project, 15 of 22 teams had never worked together before. For the vast majority, the experience was positive and resulted in new and ongoing work together. But four teams reported experiencing significant difficulties in working together. Three of these managed to work through their difficulties but one team could not and as a result, did not complete their plan. While most community agencies have some experience working collaboratively with other groups, the *Weaving Literacy* project demanded closer forms of collaboration than many had experienced before. The fact that difficulties arose is not surprising, but what is useful is how teams managed to deal with them:

“Next time I would have a much more clearly expressed partnership agreement. I would want to know how much time the other person was prepared to give to this.”

“What I have learned is that the most important thing you can have between you and your partner is trust. Without that, no partnership agreement in the world can save you. It is the process of negotiating the agreement, and getting things out on the table that is just as important as the weight of the written agreement itself.”

“Continuous dialogue is critical. To sustain this, working on small group projects consistently worked best in our situation.”

The comments above suggest approaches to “breaking down walls” that can benefit other groups that may wish to pursue common projects.

Family support and literacy organizations, while having much in common, do not always enjoy the same level of financial support and sustainability. Early learning and literacy initiatives tend to be better funded than youth or adult literacy initiatives. Many family support organizations are funded to serve only children 0–6 and their families. This reality shaped the direction of many of the *Weaving Literacy* plans, which tended to focus more on the needs of young children and their families than on older children or other adults and community members.

For many associated with the project, the decision to invite both family resource and literacy groups to the training removed prior imbalances, made the project stronger and helped strengthen connections linking the family support and literacy fields. This provided a strong project send-off and increased chances for partnerships continuing after completion of the formal project phase. In large measure, this was because the idea of embedding literacy within community life brought into clearer focus the need to draw on the skills and expertise of literacy organizations. With literacy practitioners involved from the beginning as a result of the restructured training plan, access to their expertise helped ensure greater and more lasting success in efforts to weave literacy locally.

Many teams reported that one of the key benefits of their collaborative work together was the opportunity it provided to “share the load,” reduce the sense of isolation some experience in their work and create energy to try new ways of working. The experience of two *Weaving Literacy* teams underscores the benefits of having two different organizations share the work. These two *Weaving Literacy* teams were formed by pairs of family support practitioners because there was no literacy group in their community or because the literacy group could not participate in the project. While these teams developed plans to integrate literacy into their work, the fact that neither team member had direct knowledge of the literacy field or expertise in literacy education meant that they had difficulties sustaining the momentum of their work and reaping the benefits of literacy and family support cross-field sharing that proved so beneficial to other teams.

### Broadening definitions of literacy: from skills to practices

Many *Weaving Literacy* team members said that an introduction to a broad understanding of literacy (described in the introduction to this report) stimulated a deeper interest in the scope and possibilities for how literacy connects to their day to day work.

“This broad perspective of literacy is vital—my sense of the possibilities has vastly increased. Passion.”

“Because of [*Weaving Literacy*], I have made a lasting and meaningful connection with other literacy providers and with that broad definition of literacy, have formed commitments for future collaborations for the promotion of family literacy.”

“For me I came away from this project with an increased awareness of the everyday-ness of literacy and its community impact; the potential impact on hundreds of children, parents, service providers. We have many more opportunities to link with Regional Literacy Coordinators and *Success By Six* initiatives and community agencies such as Northwest Community College may result in further literacy initiatives.”

## First Nations literacy

These broad views of literacy and community do not arise from an academic setting, but rather from the experiences of community members and agencies as they go about their work. Broad concepts of literacy are rooted in indigenous knowledge and formed a key theme in the work of *Weaving Literacy* teams supporting First Nations literacy in their communities. For the *Weaving Literacy* teams that included First Nations educators and family resource workers, a broad view of literacy was key to expressing the diversity of First Nations values, cultures and traditions. Rather than seeing western literacy as the norm, First Nations *Weaving Literacy* teams asked instead what aspects of western literacy were useful and important to their communities, and which aspects of First Nations literacy needed to be strengthened and valued, not only by First Nations groups themselves, but by the mainstream culture. In this way, oral traditions, ways of living on the land, parenting styles and approaches to healing could be seen not as a barrier to literacy or school success, but rather as integral aspects of what it means to be literate in a given community.

A key issue for First Nations *Weaving Literacy* teams was the importance of valuing the literacy knowledge of First Nations scholars and leaders and ensuring indigenous people are involved in any community-based planning for literacy.



Nora MacDonald-Plourde and Barbara Johnston present ideas for promoting holistic approaches to First Nations literacy during the *Weaving Literacy* gathering in Ottawa

To summarize, the contribution of a First Nations literacy perspective to the *Weaving Literacy* project was the awareness of the importance of culture as a context for learning, rather than an “add-on” activity. This view is summarized by Nunavut educator, Mike Bell:

“It is not enough to simply try to teach the ability to read and write. All learning occurs within a “learning context,” a framework within which reading and writing has meaning.”

## Weaving literacy in Francophone communities

Cultural and language maintenance was also a concern for minority Francophone communities that participated in the *Weaving Literacy* project. There were rich exchanges in the literacy planning workshops between Francophone *Weaving Literacy* teams working in majority Francophone settings in Québec and teams working in minority Francophone settings outside Québec. One of the key issues for Québec-based groups was the important place of literacy organizations within a broad-based community movement that links culture, language and family support to the economic and social needs of a diverse Québec society. This vision relies upon a broad view of literacy that goes beyond prevention and the parent-child relationship, as important as that is.

For groups outside of Québec, the main challenge facing Francophone literacy and family support services was the shortage of funding for French language services and the message this sends to Francophone minority communities: if families have to struggle to find services in their language, they are likely to decide not maintain that language in the home. However, literacy and family support groups serving Francophone minority communities play a vital role in educating parents about the importance of maintaining their linguistic and cultural roots and supporting them to do this. Broad-based community collaborations thus have a vital role in creating a common framework for advocacy for French language services in minority settings, and this is often the first step towards a vision of integrated literacy.

While the work of Francophone *Weaving Literacy* teams continues, it is possible to identify key areas upon which to base further collaborative work in these settings. The first is to recognize that the integration of early and family literacy approaches into family support work is at the crux of a longer term vision for a thriving French language and culture. The same is also true for the language and culture of new immigrant groups. Second, within an expanded view of literacy, family literacy is not only a form of prevention but a tool for linguistic and cultural empowerment. It is this broader context, and not only parent-child literacy activities, that holds promise for promoting French literacy skills in children and adults. Much work is needed to find innovative ways to recruit and involve Francophone families, particularly those that are “hard to reach,” and *Weaving Literacy* teams called for continued dialogue among Francophone literacy and family support groups in both minority and majority Francophone settings.

# OUTCOMES OF LITERACY ACTION PLANS



## Different plans for different communities

By the end of September, 2004, 22 plans had been developed in all five regions of the country. The plans had a unifying focus on the project's role in helping develop integrated literacy strategies while showing major diversity in the way teams chose to implement their individual strategies.

Most plans had a strong community development focus coupled with specific community outreach components. Most involved community networking and partnership development. Local teams based on a literacy/family resource partnership typically forged links into the early childhood education sector, and, in some cases, the public school system. Some teams developed connections with crime prevention programs, justice systems, libraries, immigrant settlement agencies, First Nations organizations, the public health sector and, in one case, the correctional system.

What "counted" as family literacy issues addressed in the literacy action plans varied widely from community to community and included:

- health issues including diabetes, nutrition, drug use and stress
- school drop-out rates
- the need for better inter-agency co-operation
- parent and community involvement in schools
- maintaining languages and cultures
- out-migration in resource-based communities...and more.

Some teams focused on specific literacy initiatives such as book bags, reading tents, family events with literacy activities and community-level workshops. Many incorporated local training as a follow-up once community needs had been identified. Others pursued further funding opportunities to sustain literacy efforts beyond the duration of the project.

As part of their work, many teams focused on laying the groundwork for further partnership development by strengthening the profile that literacy issues had within different spheres of community life. Indeed, raising community awareness was a strong and consistent theme in most team plans. This kind of initiative typically involved more than simply "spreading the word" of project activities; it became an integral part of community networking whereby organizations were invited to participate in exploring needs identification, resource inventorying and further plan development. The overall goal in such activities was typically

to explore different ways literacy awareness could be better integrated into the daily life of community organizations.

For this reason, plan implementation often had a strong exploratory focus, looking either for areas where literacy could be incorporated or for opportunities to seed greater literacy awareness across existing programs, activities and venues. As a consequence, many plans invested significant energy in making an inventory of local resources capable of supporting community-level collaborations.

These initiatives helped the *Weaving Literacy* project to take on a highly concrete quality. The concept of “integrated literacy” became visible not just as a form of service integration, but as a set of practices to build consciousness of literacy issues within the context of broader community issues and families everyday lives. Within this context, literacy focusing on specifically families and family support organizations became a starting point for enhanced initiatives aimed at integrating literacy across the diverse spectrum of local community life.



## Action plan outcomes

The following list shows the immense breadth and extent of community action that flowed from this project. Activities included:

- Eight workshops in the Thunder Bay region on ideas for integrating early literacy in community settings, attended by a total of 125 community workers
- A literacy awareness and planning event in Saskatoon involving 35 people from local community agencies, leading to spin-off invitations to school workshops, clear language consultations and a similar planning event in Regina
- An inventory of the existing family literacy and literacy-related activities taking place in the Yukon Territory and discovery of new ways to link family support and literacy work in order to share travel, combine workshops and connect literacy into existing community events
- Workshops for fathers on supporting their children’s literacy in the New Westminster, BC Family Place
- A community literacy awareness event involving 30 families and community workers in Selkirk, Manitoba
- A workshop for a group of school principals in Selkirk, Manitoba, on the literacy and family support work going on in the community and how schools can support and connect to it

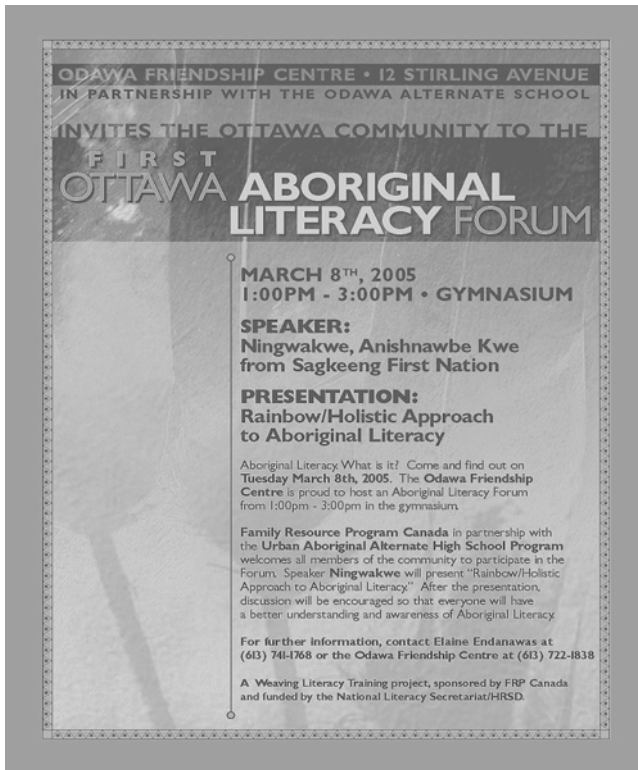
- Meetings with new community agencies in the BC Cariboo communities of Quesnel and Lac La Hache to extend existing literacy collaborations
- Eight funding proposals written for new projects to support literacy work in the BC Cariboo region
- A family literacy resource package for use by home visitors with parents of children with special needs in Drayton Valley and Breton, Alberta, and new literacy resources for the adult literacy centre to share with these home visitors and other community groups
- Book bags made by parents and community groups that were distributed to over 200 families in Drayton Valley and Breton, Alberta,
- Bag-a-book workshops in Selkirk, Manitoba, for parents who don't usually attend community activities
- Weekly reading circles involving forty new immigrant families at the Flemingdon Community Centre in Toronto
- Summer reading tents in Flemingdon Park, Toronto
- A school-aged children's buddy reading program (*Reading to Excel*) held on Saturday evenings at Gateway Public School in Toronto, involving forty-five students and twelve reading buddies
- Workshops on approaches to integrating literacy in FRC's, with six FRC staff members covering the Inter-lake region of Manitoba
- A new after-school homework club (*Dig In, Get Set*) and community kitchen with new community partners in Terrace, BC
- A *Life, Literacy and Laughter* conference connecting literacy, health and family learning attended by 115 residents and community agencies in St. Anthony's, Newfoundland, and the surrounding region The establishment of a literacy network in St. Anthony's, Newfoundland, and surrounding region
- A family literacy awareness and fun day in Peterview, Newfoundland, with ongoing activities integrating literacy into family resource centres in the region
- The establishment of a literacy committee in Peterview, Newfoundland
- A community planning event and ongoing network to support Aboriginal approaches to integrating literacy in Ottawa
- An education package to raise awareness and support for literacy integration among community agencies and municipal governments in Fredericton, NB and the surrounding area

- Ten workshops on the connections between literacy and the work of municipal and community agencies in Fredericton, NB and surrounding area



*Life, Literacy and Laughter* conference in St. Anthony's, Newfoundland.  
Hope Colbourne and Beverly May, Newfoundland *Weaving Literacy* team

- A two-day family literacy training and networking session in Wagmatcook, one of five Mi'kmaq communities in Cape Breton, involving representatives from thirteen Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia
- The formation of a Mi'kmaq family literacy group that will distribute information and hold discussion forums
- A needs assessment and resultant series of workshops on family literacy approaches held at the Maison de famille de Drummondville, and facilitated by staff members of the *Ludolettre Centre d'Education Populaire*
- A series of 5 workshops for 10 Sudanese families in Calgary on ways to support their children's literacy and schooling
- A series of 5 workshops for 8 leaders in the Sudanese community in Calgary to promote networking, develop shared understanding about how to access community resources to support Sudanese families and identify ways to support first and second language literacy in the Sudanese community more generally



A flyer inviting participants to discuss opportunities and approaches for promoting integrated approaches to literacy that reflect the values and practices of Aboriginal literacies

**Taken together**, the literacy action plans resulted in:

- **coordination of 28 workshops** promoting awareness of literacy issues and providing ideas of integrating literacy for family resource staff, community leaders and staff of community government agencies
- **creation of 18 new literacy workshops and community events** for parents, caregivers and children designed to support literacy acquisition; **13** of these **were a series of workshops** and **at least 8 of these continue** beyond the *Weaving Literacy* project
- **development of 5 new literacy resource packages**: one for use by community agencies in New Brunswick, one for home visitors of families with special needs in Alberta and three for families to use at home to support their children's literacy
- **establishment of 5 new literacy networks** in various regions of the country to support ongoing collaboration surrounding literacy and related issues;
- **production of a planning guide** with the potential to support ongoing community-based literacy planning in each of these 22 pilot communities and beyond
- **participation of a total of at least 895 people**, including 44 *Weaving Literacy* team members, in these workshops and community events or as recipients of literacy resource packages

## Impacts of the *Weaving Literacy* project

Because the aim of this project was to build community capacity for integrated action around literacy, the impacts noted here emphasize the collaborative elements of the work that occurred. There is no doubt that individual and family literacy has been and will continue to be strengthened in these communities as a result of these new collaborations; this project did not set out to measure changes in individual literacy skill levels. Significant community impacts included the following:

- A range of concrete links between community-based literacy and family support organization were strengthened, and many were made that had not existed before.
- Community partners became aware of the literacy issues in communities and how their work connects to literacy.
- Participating organizations benefited by increasing the skills of their staff and increasing contacts with other organizations and visibility of their work.
- Important work was done to collect inventories of local community needs and assets in a number of communities in relation to a broadened view of what “integrated literacy” means.
- New families that had been hard to reach started to attend family resource centres and other community groups.
- Five new literacy networks started up in various parts of the country.
- Family resource groups have new ideas for using everyday experiences to encourage child development and literacy in a variety of ways.
- There is an increase in confidence among team members in the planning process, and in practical ways to integrate literacy.
- Team members were validated and supported in the strengths-based pedagogy they practiced in their work.
- There was a general increase in awareness of future collaborative potential involving the literacy and family support fields, nationally as well as within many local communities.
- New links were made with public health and early childhood sectors with potential to expand integrated literacy approaches, in particular the Community Action Program for Children and Canada Pre-Natal Nutrition Programs.
- There was a change in thinking among many teams members regarding how to get work done as a society—not just in literacy but more broadly—from specialized knowledge and competition to inter-disciplinary knowledge and collaboration.

# POLICY ISSUES & RECOMMENDATIONS



## Funding for grass roots organizations

### The conflict between targeted funding and a holistic approach

Funding decisions are based on policy desires and limited by constraints which may not be in tune with local realities. For example, many family resource centres receive money earmarked to support the development of children 0-6. Literacy groups are often funded to promote family literacy or adult literacy programming. Who is meeting the social and literacy needs of school-aged children and youth?

Although many assume that the literacy and learning needs of school-aged children are met in the school system, children and their families need opportunities to use and develop literacy skills outside of school as well. Families also need support to advocate for their children in school, and opportunities for social connection with other community members outside of work and school: the work-school routine can be very isolating for families.

Occasionally, targeted funding restrictions led to bizarre situations for a project aimed at fostering a holistic approach to literacy and learning. For example, one *Weaving Literacy* partner could provide childcare and literacy activities for children up to age six while the other partner facilitated an evening literacy workshop for parents. But they did not have the mandate or capacity to include siblings who were over six years old. Families have children of many ages—must these children stand in the hall while their parents and younger siblings engage in family literacy activities?

Literacy groups who participated in the *Weaving Literacy* project were very happy to reach out to new families with young children. However in some cases they were concerned lest the literacy needs of adults who are not parents (or don't attend education programs as parents), school-age children, youth and seniors be forgotten. Fortunately, many of the *Weaving Literacy* teams have plans to build on their initial work together and continue to expand their literacy initiatives with other community groups in order to cover some of the gaps created by restrictive funding.

### Sustainability

In order for the work of literacy and family resource centres to be successful, their services must be reliable and stable. Participants need to be able to count on them and trust them,

knowing that they will be there over a period of time. Expertise in these fields is built because practitioners are able to “practise” and deepen their understanding through experience acquired over time.

When as a country we create community programs as “projects” that come and go as the political wind changes, the reliability of support among community members is weakened and expertise is lost as practitioners are forced to move on at the end of a project’s duration.

*Weaving Literacy* participants identified some concern about proceeding with program development that might not be funded over a long enough period of time to make a difference. Those with experience in community work were reluctant to start something that could not be completed or would lead to participant disappointment. In short, it is hard to build sustainability on what Linda Mitchell, director of Literacy BC, calls “drive-by funding.”

It must be noted, however, that the practice of collaborating with other community groups counteracts instability somewhat when organizations pool resources and advocate on behalf of one another.



## The goals of family literacy: early learning and school readiness

Another tension that sometimes exists between funding priorities and local needs is the push to promote “school readiness.” Many family literacy initiatives are funded to help young children get ready for school. However, during the planning sessions, *Weaving Literacy* teams felt that their roles also involved “getting schools ready for children.”

During the *Weaving Literacy* project, it became clear that in many parts of the country, school boards are taking an increased interest in the literacy skills of pre-school children and there are more opportunities for them to access funding to provide early literacy programs. Most teams felt that this was a positive development, but only when schools recognized the existing contributions made to early literacy and learning by community-based family resource centres and literacy groups, and are willing to collaborate and build on this work, rather than duplicate or replace it.

Some *Weaving Literacy* team members were teachers or administrators within school districts, and they voiced a strong recognition of the ways that schools can benefit when children and adults have access to a variety of literacy and learning opportunities outside of schooling.

For their part, teams moving into collaborative relationships with schools emphasized that not all literacy and learning activities can or should be oriented to the needs of formal schooling.



## The role of literacy organizations

In an integrated approach to literacy that supports the idea that literacy connects to the work of all community groups, it is easy to slide into a view that if literacy is “everywhere” than any group can “do” literacy. But the *Weaving Literacy* project has underscored that literacy organizations have a key role to play in the development of collaborations to integrate literacy into wide-spread community development. To some extent this is because literacy is linked to so many aspects of life as described above, but it is also because literacy organizations have focused for many years on facilitating the diverse literacy and learning needs of adults outside of school settings. Literacy organizations have long carried important messages regarding the connections between literacy, schools, community development and employment, and have developed a broad range of expertise in literacy instruction and other areas that are central to quality literacy provision. These include knowledge of approaches to teaching reading and writing to youth and adults, awareness of clear language design principles, curriculum development and so on.

More recently, literacy organizations have entered into the area of family literacy. Although, literacy organizations have partnered with others—notably colleges, schools, correction systems and workplaces—to deliver adult literacy programs, the field of family literacy has stimulated wider collaborations and brought more attention to the relationship between literacy and community development.



## Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are offered to funding agencies, policy-makers, literacy and family support organizations in the spirit of learning from the *Weaving Literacy* project and building on its successes and challenges.

- Create frameworks for core funding to sustain the work of community-based organizations that provide integrated literacy and learning opportunities to support families.
- Improve the benefits, working conditions and salaries of those who do the day to day work of supporting literacy, learning and families in Canada—this work is vital for communities to survive and thrive.

- Maintain a broad view of “what counts” as family, so it includes family members of all ages, and the fact that many primary caregivers are grandparents, siblings, friends and relatives. If the terms early literacy, family literacy, youth literacy, adult literacy get in the way of this or cause competition for funding, take them off the table and talk about “community literacy.”
- Recognize that planning, networking and building collaborative relationships are practices central to the success of integrated approaches to literacy. This work should be embedded in the job descriptions of not just Executive Directors, but staff members who work with families, and teach literacy, on a daily basis. Alternatively, or in addition, organization budgets should include funding to cover replacements for staff who are involved in collaborative work.
- Value and respect the need for organizations to choose their own partners and respond pro-actively to opportunities to integrate literacy into existing community initiatives.
- Include literacy organizations in planning and designing initiatives that seek to integrate literacy into community settings.
- Maintain a broad view of “what counts” as literacy, one that includes not only success in school, but the learning aspirations of individuals and communities that go beyond their roles as parents, to support their first languages, cultures, personal goals and interests.
- Move away from “one size fits all” literacy intervention models to a view that communities can be “critical consumers” of literacy models, and choose or adapt existing models, or create their own initiatives to respond to local issues.
- Develop research tools to capture complex community development processes and their impacts on literacy acquisition using more sophisticated theoretical models to measure “embedded” or integrated literacy acquisition.
- Support research in practice projects that help to measure the impacts of integrated approaches to literacy upon a number of literacy related concerns in communities.

## CONCLUSIONS & WAYS FORWARD

The collaborative approach of the *Weaving Literacy* project is a clear demonstration of how connecting practices can support community life and literacy development. If as practitioners and researchers we accept the point of view that literacy is connected to much that goes in people's lives and is a necessary component in their lives, then we understand the need to link literacy development to what people are doing in the community, in society, in everyday existence. From a holistic perspective, health is a combination of social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, economic, and physical well-being.

The *Weaving Literacy* project and other community learning movements are learning that formal educational literacy initiatives are most effective in a community culture that values literacy and learning and that provide many pathways and options for learning, rather than rationing such opportunities. The informal learning that occurs as part of family and community life is critical to the success of formal, institutionalized learning processes. Therefore, building literacy-friendly communities needs to be seen in the context of the relationship of literacy to people's everyday lives.

This is why partnerships and other collaborations for literacy development are so important. Community-wide, like-minded partnerships create lasting and consistent outcomes. While small scale, time-limited projects are often a place to start the community building process, they need to be seen in the context of the "big picture" and soon linked to other community-wide initiatives that share common goals and strategies.

The *Weaving Literacy* project helped develop this "learning community" approach by starting to partner literacy work with that of family-based organizations. These partnerships provide cohesion for families during some key transition points, particularly entry into parenthood and entry into Kindergarten. There are other transition points that could be addressed in these partnerships or may require other collaborations. These include middle and high school entry, post secondary entry and employment entry.

Indeed the experiences of these collaborations in linking literacy to the needs of families with young children, suggest the potential benefits of pursuing community-based literacy planning with other sectors of the community as well. These include youth groups, seniors' organizations, people with disabilities, job creation groups, environmental groups, housing associations, anti-poverty and food security groups and so on.



## Training for community-based literacy planning

Community-based literacy planning is effective because it brings together many potential players and draws on their expertise from the beginning. It can examine critical questions from a variety of perspectives:

- How should literacy be connected to other community issues and planning processes?
- What collaborative partnerships among individuals, community organizations, public institutions, and private enterprises are needed to further the literacy agenda?
- Where are the strategic intervention points in communities, community organizations and public institutions?
- What are good ways for building community and organizational awareness of the importance of literacy?
- How should specific literacy programs be designed and implemented?
- How can a community, community organization, or public institutions assess the impacts of its literacy work?

The *Weaving Literacy Planning Guide* that has been developed to guide people in the process of community planning is greatly enhanced by the workshops that were given for its use. In order to do this work, every group that is involved needs to be clear about what they hope the results will be from their collaborative work, and what they fear might happen. As the *Weaving Literacy* project has shown, each community is unique in terms of its history of practice, the personalities involved, levels of funding, size of population, local economy, even geography and climate, can have an impact on how practice can occur. In community-based literacy planning workshops, there is an opportunity for people to discuss these factors, the possibilities and the challenges, and gain some confidence in the community - building approach.

The *Weaving Literacy* project developed a training model for community practitioners so that they could enter into planning for literacy development with interested people in their own communities. This is a long term approach. It requires patience, flexibility, relationship-building, and time. However, it has the best chance for deeply embedded thinking and practice on a variety of fronts to address community literacy needs and challenges.



## Future directions for integrated approaches to literacy

If the community development approach to literacy development holds promise for coming to terms with issues that shape the literacy and learning skills of Canadians, then the *Weaving Literacy* project has developed a model for doing it. The model of “organized chaos” proved successful in valuing and respecting the role of social context and community knowledge in shaping literacy initiatives, while providing a framework for documenting this work and supporting and connecting these communities to a larger movement.

This model brings together existing best practice in community development and sustainable communities that apply in the literacy field and beyond. Indeed, inter-disciplinary, inclusive approaches to learning are the cornerstone of important policy documents developed outside of the literacy field.

For example, a very noteworthy document was published by Environment Canada in 2002. The *Framework of Environmental Learning and Sustainability in Canada* recognizes that, “All members of society should be engaged in learning, in ways that are participatory and transformative.” It calls for approaches to learning in Canada that complement the approaches to learning that were called for and demonstrated in the *Weaving Literacy* project.

These include:

- Recovering, restoring, honouring and using the traditional knowledge and wisdom of aboriginal peoples will provide a sound basis for environmental learning and sustainability.
- Learning from those who value local knowledge as well as the knowledge and wisdom acquired by a people living in a region for a long time is important. The participation of rural communities could be particularly influential in this regard.
- Having an authentic, personal experience of “sense of place”, beginning with one’s own home and community, is one of the many ways in which citizens can learn environmentally
- Using intergenerational approaches, so learners and educators can learn from one another with mutual respect, participating in richer experiences and enjoying the connection that these approaches can provide

(*Framework for Environmental Learning and Sustainability in Canada, Environment Canada, 2002*)  
[http://www.ec.gc.ca/education/framework/framework\\_theframework\\_e.htm#2.1](http://www.ec.gc.ca/education/framework/framework_theframework_e.htm#2.1)

Each of the above recommended best practices intersects with approaches to literacy education carried out in the *Weaving Literacy* project. Indeed, as diverse community agencies, social movements and various levels of government inside and outside of Canada incorporate into their work inter-disciplinary, cooperative and integrated approaches to

knowledge creation and sustainability, these values and practices should be a key feature of a Canadian literacy strategy as well.

The *Weaving Literacy* project was one of the few national literacy projects in Canada that have been bilingual. The sharing between Francophone, Anglophone, new immigrant and First Nations family support and literacy educators contributed rich insights about the connections between literacy, language and culture brought forward. The extra expense and effort to support a bilingual project was rewarded many times over by the relationships that were formed, the walls that were broken down, and the rich repertoire of resources and experiences the project could draw upon and share with the rest of the country. This is vital to the expression of a Canadian identity able to embrace, rather than erase, linguistic and cultural diversity.

Ongoing support for the work begun in the *Weaving Literacy* project is key to sustaining these innovative beginnings. There is great potential to study the long-term impacts of these community-building approaches through “research in practice” projects attached to these initiatives.

Yasmin Khan, a *Weaving Literacy* team member living in Toronto, shares the continued progress of their initiative:

“I have ensured that the Reading Program, initiated through *Weaving Literacy*, continue during summer months, and last Saturday I visited the centre to see the wonderful smiling faces at the centre!!! I have parents coming up to me, appreciating the help we offered their children throughout last year and how their kids made improvements in school.”

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