

Family Literacy Reflections...

A Publication of the Centre for Expertise in Family Literacy

Vol. 3 Fall 2007

Understanding Cultural Diversity in Family Literacy Programming

In this issue we feature:

- Research on how to involve ethnic minority parents more democratically in their children's education
- Research into working effectively with minority ethnic families
- A current family literacy resource developed by the National Family and Parenting Institute

In this issue *Reflections* provides information that will be helpful for those working with ESL families. Communication is the key to success. This can be achieved if staff listen, are compassionate, open minded, honest and prepared to admit that they do not know and understand everything.



This photograph was taken at the end of a ten-week Storysacks program at the Family Learning Centre, Kingston, ON.

The beautiful work that you see above was the result of sharing many talents and good communication skills, not perfect language skills.

As well as the many hand-crafted items that were made, a book was created on the computer using all the key words from the story translated into four languages. *Storysacks*, based on folk tales told by elders from different cultures, have been used successfully in multicultural groups worldwide.

Supporting Minority Ethnic Families *(South Asian Hindus and Muslims in Britain: Developments in Family Support)*

Harriet Becher and Fatima Husain

Although this research came from Family Support services, it is relevant to those of us involved with Family Literacy since supporting families in their parenting role is also a priority for us. In 2007, the families we have interacted with are increasingly diverse in background and include many from minority ethnic groups. They frequently complain of a “lack of sensitivity” when it comes to programs and services.

The report outlines the complexity of the challenges staff face in providing appropriate and sensitive support for families while being responsive to the ever changing communities.

Previous research drew attention to the importance of “cultural sensitivity” when providing services but failed to address the issue of religious sensitivity. “Culture” is not static. “Multicultural” is too vague a word. It is easy to make the mistake of generalizing about a particular group. This report states that, “‘culture’ consists of all elements: moral, spiritual, economic and artistic that make up a collective existence and that enable individuals to have a defined and meaningful existence.”

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Guess What?

Do you know why children learn English as a second language more easily if they are fluent in their first language?

(See bottom of next page for answer.)



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Often minority ethnic groups live in households where three generations share the home. They might live in poverty resulting from low income. Recent immigrants may lack education, have health issues and be more vulnerable to racially motivated crimes. There may also be divisions within a faith community.

It also addresses some recurring problems that result from current approaches and concludes with examples of best practices from around the world. The key is to develop trust through good communication with clients. Educating ourselves about the various religions of the world and being ‘culturally knowledgeable’ are the way forward.

Cultural competence can be best summed up with a quotation from the *Scottish Parenting Forum*, 2002, which states:

“Effective work in a cross-cultural context requires: Sensitivity, openness, respect and humility.”

This report is highly recommended.

Anne Jackson

Family Literacy Program Directory

If you have not already done so, add your Family Literacy program details to the directory that NALD is compiling by following the link to:

www.abc-canada.org/fld/familyliteracydirectory.shtml

Broadening our Conceptualization of Parental Involvement: Ethnic Minority Parental Participation as Democratic Educational Practice
Anita Parhar

The following is a summary of an article originally published in B.C. Educational Leadership Research, March 2006

Parents need opportunities to be meaningfully involved in their children’s education.

Is a lack of democratic process for parent involvement in educational systems a key reason that minority parents do not get involved? Are schools in the multicultural reality of Canada today still the territory of Eurocentric ideas of success? These questions are put forward and discussed by Anita Parhar.

Ideally, a democratic institution promotes and supports the participation of all people who are interested in that institution. Democratic participation embraces free and open communication so that everyone involved can come to common understandings about matters of mutual concern.

Parhar states that in Canadian multicultural societies there are many personal and individual ideas of “what is the good life, of what is right, and of what is worthwhile, as well as multiple ideas about what the best means are to achieve our goals.” These different understandings of education and what it should be, turn up at school everyday. It is **the** place where all parents and their children’s educators could participate in open discussion and work out collective solutions.

Research shows that parental involvement is important to student success in school. Parhar reviews the many reasons minority parents might not become involved in schools and declares that teachers and institutions are not making it easier, even though there are many policies in place that promote the idea of ethnic minority parental involvement. To truly involve parents, more than simply inviting them to parent council meetings

needs to take place. Parents become engaged because they are listened to and actual **change** takes place because of their concerns.

This discussion paper focussed on ethnic minority parents and schools. I think a further argument could be made that parents of children from preschool to secondary school who are not engaged in their children's education might become more so if the ideas articulated in this paper are embraced by educational systems.

Deb Nesbitt Munroe



Answer:

Second language builds on previous knowledge and experience. Successful second language learning depends on the continual maintenance of first language literacy which is achieved when relatives and friends listen to, read and talk about stories in the first language.



Resources Reflections Recommends:

Have you found it difficult to communicate effectively with some of the parents who come to your centre?

The National Family and Parenting Institute has developed a toolkit, **“Cultural Competence in Family Support”** by **Fatima Husain**, for practitioners working with black, minority ethnic and minority faith families as a result of the research report, “Supporting Minority Ethnic Families,” mentioned earlier.

The guidelines were originally intended for those working with black and minority ethnic families, but they are also appropriate when working with families who are disadvantaged by poverty, have low levels of literacy, accessibility to resources or disabilities.

It is published in an attractive, easy-to-use book. The toolkit was developed to help practitioners understand the phrase, “Cultural Competence.”

Mistakes are usually made when working with minority groups due to a lack of cultural knowledge, awareness and sensitivity. This comprehensive guide tackles the issues surrounding culture, discrimination, the definition of “family” in today’s society, and effective communication strategies. It also contains an excellent reference section. The toolkit ends with a set of fact sheets that describe the seven major world religions. This should be prescribed reading for all practitioners in Canada who work with our culturally diverse population.

Read **“Putting literacy in the Picture”** by **Laura Hendrick** in the Spring 2007 edition of *Clarity*, the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network’s publication (www.cllrnet.ca). It describes a project that helped to make the idea of ABC books more relevant to children who do not have English as their first language.