

Executive Summary

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In partnership with the Read to Me! Program

Early Childhood Literacy Programs in Canada: A National Survey



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All photographs courtesy of Read to Me!

Foreword

The evidence supporting early literacy is solid.

Research tells us to start early, empower parents, and engage children in literacy-rich activities. Yet there is a huge gap between what we know and what we do in Canada. We know that investing in early literacy is an investment in the future of Canada, yet there is no national strategy to ensure that every Canadian child is welcomed into the world with the message that literacy is their birthright.

The literacy landscape of Canada is dotted with programs often working in isolation and struggling with shared challenges. Over the last decade exciting new programs have been launched, but unfortunately we have also lost important programs like Newfoundland's *Books for Babies* because of lack of sustainable funding. For those of us on the front lines there is little opportunity to share resources and expertise, so we often find ourselves "re-inventing the wheel" with the creation of program models and materials.

When the Read to Me! Nova Scotia Family Literacy program was launched in 2002, I looked to other early literacy groups across the country for guidance to help shape our program. I was surprised to find how difficult it was to find and connect with programs doing similar work. There was no national body to bring us all together. When I did find other groups I was struck by the similarity of our challenges: finding sustainable funding, sourcing high quality books and resources, and accessing and conducting research. I felt there was much to be gained by connecting across Canada to build a stronger voice for early literacy nationally.

In the spring of 2010 I met with Dr. Vivian Howard, Professor at Dalhousie's School of Information Management to discuss the possibility of conducting a national survey of early literacy programs. Dr. Howard was enthusiastic about the project and brought on two Dalhousie School of Information Management students, Deirdre O'Reilly and Naomi Balla-Boudreau. Deirdre and Naomi worked diligently to gather information from a variety of early literacy book gift and reading programs across Canada.

I hope this survey will help programs connect so we can begin to share research, resources and expertise. By connecting the dots and working together we can build a strong national voice to advocate for early literacy in Canada.

Carol McDougall

Director, Read to Me! Nova Scotia Family Literacy Program

The Purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of early childhood literacy in Canada by identifying programs and gathering information on their operations, programming and challenges. Targeted programs include those that offer literacy resources and/or programs to families with children under the age of five, and include book gift and reading programs. A literature review and national survey were used to generate data and identify trends and gaps between research and practice. This research project is a joint initiative between the Read to Me! Nova Scotia Family Literacy Program and Dalhousie University's School of Information Management.

This is not an exhaustive study of early literacy programs but it does provide a broad survey of various book gift and early reading programs. The study captures basic information on the size, scope, and model of each program. Respondents were asked questions related to their goals, target population, governance, staff, research, funding, outreach and promotions strategies. The study found that while there is great diversity in early childhood literacy programs in Canada, many programs share similar successes and challenges.

At present a patchwork of literacy programs exists across Canada. This research hopes to build an awareness of, and connections between, early literacy programs to help build a network to support early literacy nationally. Such a network would allow for greater communication and knowledge sharing between organizations.

Emerging Themes

Successes

According to survey responses it is clear that programs are invested in the communities that they serve, take pride in their impact, and work hard to develop effective community partnerships to enhance their work. In particular, some programs highlighted:

- The enthusiasm and positive response that their program had received from families, staff, institutions and communities
- Having strong and consistent attendance at programs and program growth
- Developing connections between communities and libraries, and reaching minority populations and hard to reach communities

Challenges

Despite these successes, early literacy programs share common challenges. While some of the challenges reflected unique circumstances, three challenges were prominent across the range of respondents. They were:

- Secure funding, specifically long-term sustainable funding, which underlies all aspects of early literacy programming
- Engaging parents and connecting with specific targeted populations
- Recruiting and retaining sufficient staff and volunteers to meet program demand, especially when many employee positions are part-time

It is clear that the programs surveyed are making valuable contributions to the communities they serve. Opportunities remain, however, for growth and development, especially as understandings around early childhood literacy and development expand.

From the survey responses and the literature review came the following recommendations for moving forward:

Funding

Establish sustainable and flexible funding for early literacy programming.

Staff training

Provide opportunities for ongoing training for early literacy staff and volunteers to support and improve programming.

Promotion and program materials

Programs and programming material should be inclusive and reflect the community being served. Develop national best practices for program models and resources to enhance programs and facilitate resource sharing, training and evaluation.

Network

A national strategy would help facilitate greater opportunities for collaboration. While a national conference would provide opportunities for practitioners to share knowledge and collaborate, a successful network would extend these opportunities beyond one event.

Further research

Develop community/university research partnerships to support high quality research that is relevant to front line practitioners. Develop methods of knowledge transfer to ensure that the latest research is put into the hands of practitioners who can then put research into practice with families.

To view the full report visit www.readtome.ca and click on the Research link.

