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Community Service Providers as Literacy Facilitators: A Pilot Project

A pilot project was conducted with 20 community service providers that included health, social, and other professional workers from an inner-city area in one of Canada's capital cities. The goals of the project were (a) to explore a range of community service providers' perspectives on literacy; (b) to determine if six hours of training in family literacy development strategies modified community service providers' understanding of literacy learning; and (c) to examine how community service providers, as a result of the training, incorporated literacy events for the families they serve in their professional practice. Participants were involved in two three-hour workshops directed to literacy acquisition in general and family literacy practices in particular. Data were collected through pre- and post-survey questionnaires, individual interviews, and information collected during the workshops. Results indicate that participants demonstrated a shift in attitudes from skills achievement to socio-cultural perspectives on literacy acquisition. The community service providers also attended to and included literacy events more frequently in their own professional practices after workshop participation.

On a dirigé un projet pilote aver 20 agent(e)s de services communautaires tel(le)s que des professionnel(le)s dans les domaines de la santé, des services sociaux, et autres d'un quartier défavorisée d'une des villes capitales canadiennes. Les objectifs du projet consistaient: (a) à éxplorer la gamme des perspectives de l'alphabétisation des agent(e)s de services communautaires; (b) à déterminer si six heures d'entraînement en stratégies de développement familiale de l'alphabétisation modifiaient les habiletés des agent(e)s de services communautaires à mieux comprendre le processus de l'alphabétisation; et (c) à examiner comment les agent(e)s de service communautaire, suite à leur entraînement incorporaient dans leurs pratiques professionnelles des activités propices à favoriser l'alphabétisation dans les familles desservies. Ceux et celles qui participaient dans les deux séminaires de trois heures chacun visaient l'acquisition de concepts généraux de l'alphabétisation et de la mise en pratique de l'alphabétisation en situation familiale en particulier. La collecte des données s'est faite à partir des résponses obtenues aux questionnaires distribués avant et après les séminaires, des entrevues individuelles, et aussi de l'information collectionnée pendant les séminaires-mêmes. Les résultats indiquent que chez les participant(e)s il s'effectuait un changement d'attitude par rapport à l'alphabétisation, c'est-à-dire, d'une perspective valorisant d'abord l'acquisition d'habiletés vers une perspective de l'alphabétisation valorisant de plus en plus ses dimensions socioculturelles. Aussi, suite à leur participation dans les séminaires, les agent(e)s de services communautaires portaienf plus leur attention aux événements pertinents à l'alphabétisation et incorporaient davantage des activités favorables à l'alphabétisation dans leur pratiques professionelles.

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Introduction

This article describes a pilot project conducted with 20 community service providers that included health, social, and other professional workers from an inner-city area in one of Canada's capital cities. The goals of the project were (a) to explore a range of community service providers' perspectives on literacy; (b) to determine if six hours of training in family literacy development strategies modified community service providers' understanding of literacy acquisition; and (c) to examine how community service providers, as a result of the training, incorporated literacy events for the families they serve in their professional practice.

The African adage that it takes a whole village to educate a child is particularly meaningful in light of current literature that views literacy development as a community responsibility rather than solely the responsibility of the school (Heath, 1982; Purcell-Gates, Allier, & Smith, 1995; Taylor, 1983). Many researchers maintain that children grow into a culture of literacy and develop attitudes about and abilities for literacy long before they come to school. The role the family plays in bringing children to an awareness and eventual practice of literacy is critical to their literacy development. Some families, however, because of a variety of social, economic, educational, or cultural reasons are unaware of how early literacy development occurs and may not provide their preschool children with literacy episodes that foster literacy development.

The family as an institution does not stand alone in the community. It is closely intertwined with other organizations; for example, health and social agencies provide support services to families when they offer well-baby clinics, recreational mother and toddler programs, second-language classes for immigrants, and financial planning sessions, to mention only a few. In many instances, community health, social, and other service providers have access to family environments for years before children's school entry. Professional community workers who are aware of how literacy is teamed and who can suggest appropriate home language and literacy strategies are in an ideal position to influence positively family literacy behaviors. As community service providers interact in particular with young parents who are educationally disadvantaged, socially isolated, and/or who have low literacy levels, they may provide ongoing language and literacy development check-ups in conjunction with their routine social, health, or other professional practices. Furthermore, by including the voices of community service providers in supporting literacy development in the home, the importance of literacy learning as a family event and the significance of including even very young children in these events are underscored. A report by the National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO, 1992) titled *Literacy and poverty: A view from the inside* suggests that greater collaboration between literacy programs and other service organizations in the community results in a more cohesive approach to literacy learning. Such an approach crosses generational boundaries and highlights for parents the centrality of their role as positive and supportive models for their children's literacy learning.

One may suggest that although professional community workers are highly trained in their fields of practice, they may not have a clear understanding of current perspectives on how literacy is acquired. It is possible that such workers may hold views about literacy that reflect those presented in the popular press, which maintain that literacy is simply the achievement of a selection of reading and writing skills that can be used in any context, that literacy is decontextualized from cultural practices, that less literate parents do not have the ability to support literacy practices in the home, and that literacy learning only begins and results from formal school instruction.

Although the research presented in this article sought to enhance the role of community service providers as agents for literacy development, the nature of their understanding of literacy learning and how literacy might be incorporated into their professional practice were the prime focuses for investigation. In short, this study was an attempt to sensitize community service providers to literacy issues as they relate in particular to their less literate clients' lives. It should be noted that this research project was exploratory in nature as little in the literature addresses the topic of community workers as literacy agents for the families they serve.

Related Literature

The notion that language and literacy are social processes that cannot be separated from the social development of young children is currently accepted in the literature (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Heath 1982; Hiebert, 1986). Inherent in this view is the belief that the family is an educative community in which shared learning experiences occur. There has been increasing interest among educators in the connection between families and literacy (Gadsen, 1995) as a result of evidence indicating that early childhood and school programs may be more successful when family members are involved. As noted by several researchers (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Handel & Goldsmith, 1994; Nickse, 1990), an important issue in family literacy programs is that they tend to teach parents and children literacy strategies that are characteristic of mainstream families, such as book reading and appropriate verbal reactions with children. However, as indicated by Auerbach (1989), special sensitivity is needed to take into consideration the cultural roots of the populations served by family literacy programs. Auerbach contends that language minority families and those with less proficient literacy skills value literacy and that many family practices that do not include overt print events can act as support for and avenues to literacy development. Fagan (1996) concurs when he notes that family routines such as mealtime discussions about daily events or parental consistency related to bedtime behaviors provide children with appropriate learning that will help them in school. In short, several investigators (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991; Strickland & Morrow, 1989) discard the deficiency model for literacy acquisition for families that are socially and educationally disadvantaged.

A search of the literature did not find many studies that investigated broader interpretations for community-literacy collaborations. Most of the citations provide descriptions of programs designed to increase either adult literacy abilities or ways to involve families in mainstream literacy events so that the children may be better prepared to learn in school (St. Pierre, Swartz, Deck, & Nickel, 1993). For example, the few studies that addressed literacy and health focused primarily on the development of health print materials for less literate adults (Doak, Doak, & Root, 1996). Even today considerable attention and money are paid to the preparation of such materials. The premise appears to be that if the print is written in a simple format, people with literacy difficulties will be more able to understand the messages it contains. Although no doubt such a premise is valid, it is possible that such practices maintain and support perspectives of deficiency with respect to less literate people.

Proponents of the socio-cultural perspective, on the other hand, contend that literacy is not a have-have not phenomenon. They maintain that literacy proficiency evolves as people attempt to use print in the context of their lives, at home, at work, and in the community. Researchers such as Street (1992) suggest that those who hold an "autonomous" view of literacy support a technical skills perspective, in which these technical skills can be applied across contexts and cultures without attention to specific situational demands. Street prefers an alternative view, which he terms an "ideological" model for literacy. This model recognizes literacy as practices that respect the political, social and cultural environments in which those practices occur. His perspective is supported by Fingeret and Drennon (1997), Stein (1995), and Taylor (1983). Although the efforts to develop plain language texts may encourage meaningful print interactions in the family context, such texts alone will not be sufficient to support parent-child literacy relationships that evolve as family members use literacy to meet their own social and cultural needs.

The research is rich with documentation on how children acquire literacy. However, if community workers' perspectives on literacy acquisition are similar to those presented in the popular press, one may suggest that they will be more inclined to ignore the issue of child literacy development, considering it primarily the responsibility and concern of the school. For example, if community workers know why reading to children provides a solid base for formal literacy instruction, one may assume that they will be more likely to encourage such reading in the less literate families they serve.

Method

The Sample

A community health agency in a major Canadian city was approached to determine its interest in having some of its workers participate in a series of workshops directed toward literacy. The response from agency personnel was positive, although there was some initial reluctance to be involved in a research endeavor. This reluctance related to questions about the fruitfulness of investigating those who are literate in a study that explored ways of assisting their less literate clients. In addition, this agency could not release more than two staff members for the designated time (six hours), so the administrator suggested that other health and community agencies be approached to determine interest in participation in the study. After a series of eight meetings with several community agency administrators, 14 agencies elected to send one or two of their staff to participate in the workshops. The names of the individual participants were forwarded to one of the researchers, who subsequently contacted them all by telephone to talk about their professional practices and to determine what might be included in the workshops to meet their needs adequately.

Twenty community workers participated in the study: five public health nurses, four social workers, five outreach workers (individuals who provide assistance in the homes of at-risk families), one dental assistant, two health agency administrators, one community counselor, and two community second-language facilitators. After having been advised of the purpose and nature of the study and having been assured that confidentiality, anonymity, and other ethical aspects were being adhered to, all individuals agreed to participate. All participants were women. Both researchers co-facilitated the workshops.

Pre- and Post-Survey

Participants completed a Propositions About Literacy Survey (PALS) before the workshops began and again at their conclusion. Broadly based on the work of Deford (1979), the survey asked respondents to rate on a four-item Likert scale their agreement or disagreement with 30 statements about literacy. The PALS statements were composed from a range of literacy topics addressed over a one-year period in local newspapers and magazines. Seven statements focused on the role of parents in their children's literacy learning, 10 addressed emergent literacy, six attended to the processes of literacy learning, and seven centered on the sociocultural nature of literacy learning. In the data analysis procedures, *strongly agree* and *agree* sections were collapsed into one item; a similar format was used for *strongly disagree* and *disagree* selections. Percentage totals were then identified for each item for both pre- and post-survey results. Pre-/post-surveys were completed by 18 of the 20 participants.

The Workshops

The workshops were an integral part of the research process and allowed for immediate use of the information generated in them for those who participated. In other words, the workshops were used as a participatory research technique.

The goals of the workshops were: (a) to provide participants with strategies to help them recognize and support the development of early literacy behaviors in the families they serve; (b) to identify contexts where community service providers may positively influence the literacy learning behaviors of their adult and child clients; and (c) to determine if literacy awareness workshops extend community service providers' understanding of literacy learning and use.

The workshops were designed to provide community workers with those perspectives on literacy currently held in the literature noted above. If community professionals were sensitized to recognize the positive (literacy) events presently occurring in families, as opposed to viewing these families as literacy deficient, the workers might indicate to parents the appropriateness of these events for children, as well as suggest other more intentional literacy practices in families. Furthermore, the underlying premise of the workshops addressed the necessity of literacy acquisition as both socially and culturally meaningful to families rather than being simply the attainment of school literacy practices.

Although three two-hour workshops were originally planned to occur on three separate days across the months of September, October, and December, the collaborating agencies suggested that two three-hour workshops would be more appropriate because of the difficulty of releasing staff. One of the agencies elected to host both workshops.

The first three-hour workshop addressed the topic of literacy in general terms. Topics included Canadian literacy statistics, literacy use in daily life, the identification of the literacy needs of clients, strategies to incorporate literacy into professional practice, and strategies to support the literacy needs of less literate clients. In addition, workshop attenders participated in a shared-book reading session modeled on the BOOKS (Hayden & Wahl, 1996) program. This program uses children's literature as a launch pad for discussion of issues that surface from the text in light of the reader's personal experiences. The program also uses the print in the text as a medium for enhancing adults' reading ability. At the conclusion of the first workshop, six children's books were given to each participant with the request that each identify on a written form how she used the books in her own professional practice. Participants were also asked to identify how they supported the literacy efforts of their clients during the three-week period between the first and second workshops.

The second workshop addressed concepts surrounding emergent literacy. Topics included concepts about print, learning to read, family literacy practices, and fostering community awareness for literacy. Feedback about how respondents had used literacy in their practice over the three-week period was sought and incorporated into the discussions surrounding family literacy. This workshop concluded with the distribution of five more children's books to participants. A package of professional materials that addressed adult and child literacy was distributed for future reference.

Although the researchers originally intended to donate a selection of books to families and explore how these books were being used in the families, for legal reasons the researchers could not be given the names of families with whom the participants worked. Therefore, the books were given instead to the workshop participants to use in their practice. Each participant received 11 children's books.

Interviews

Three months after the last workshop, one of the researchers contacted as many participants as possible for a telephone interview. It had been intended to have more personal contact, but the workload of the participating professionals, and the difficulty of finding mutually agreeable times to meet, made face-to-face interviews impossible. Sixteen of the workshop participants were interviewed. Two had moved away and two could not be contacted in spite of several attempts to do so. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Three questions directed the dialogue: (a) What literacy practices are you now including in your professional work that you were not doing prior to the workshops? (b) What do you see as outcomes from these practices? and (c) What difficulties are you experiencing incorporating literacy into your professional practice? If a participant responded negatively to the first question, the second question was not asked, but this happened only once.

Results and Discussion

Survey Results

Results indicate a shift in workshop participants' understanding of literacy. As noted in Table 1, participants' attitudes about literacy acquisition and development moved from a more traditional understanding of literacy to one that includes more holistic socio-cultural perspectives.

For those survey items that addressed the role of parents in literacy learning (2, 4, 8, 13, 21, 25, and 28), participants indicated that they revised their original views of less literate parents as deficient and therefore inappropriate literacy models for their children. The change in perspective for item 21 (parents need to be good readers themselves so that they can model reading for their children) is particularly interesting. Over 50% of participants originally agreed with this statement. On conclusion of the workshops, only 11% held to this perspective. These results suggest that if community service providers maintain this new perspective as they interact with their less literate clients, the professionals will be more likely to suggest that less literate parents talk about the pictures in a book with their children and select simple books that they can read rather than ignoring the issue of literacy.

Participants also demonstrated a new understanding of emergent literacy (items 1, 10, 16,17,18,19,22,24,26, and 27) although it should be noted that the strength of change was not as dramatic as in other sections of the survey. It appears that appropriate understandings of how young children learn to read were held by several participants prior to workshop input. However, greater acceptance generally for current perspectives on learning to read evolved. It should be noted that most of the participants were themselves parents. One may suggest that their initial responses to those items on the survey represented their practice and understanding as parents rather than as community professionals. Such a suggestion seems reasonable given their initial responses to the role of parents in literacy development, as noted above. In other words, what they viewed as appropriate emergent behaviors was a reflection of their own practice with their own children, practice that they may not have seen as possible literacy behaviors for less literate families. On the other hand, if the respondents' perspectives on emergent literacy are maintained as they interact with less literate families, and if they attempt to act on their new understandings for the role of less literate parents in their children's literacy development, the community workers may well have a positive influence on the literacy development of the families they serve.

The six items that focused on the processes for literacy learning (3, 6, 7, 9, 11, and 12) demonstrated that respondents' understanding of literacy acquisition moved from a traditional approach to one that is more culturally aware and less focused on the discrete aspects of print. The level of movement in most cases was quite strong, with a range of 16% to 50% in change for perspective. I example, on the pretest only half of the participants considered reading to children provided them with a base for formal literacy instruction (item 10). However, in the posttest survey, 100% agreed with this statement. As the workshops included considerable emphasis on how reading to children builds their concepts for print, it seems that the participants may more readily encourage parents to read to their children not only because it may be a pleasurable activity, but also because they want to inform these parents that such an activity provides the basis for future formal school literacy instruction.

Table 1

Propositions About Literacy Survey: Percentage Totals

Items	Pretest		Posttest	
	SA/A	SD/D	SA/A	SD/D
1. Children are ready to learn to read and write when they are five or six years old.	83	17	28	72
2. Parents with low literacy abilities do not have the skills necessary to encourage reading in the home.	44	56	6	94
3. Reading is essentially a skill of decoding print.	61	39	44	56
4. The children of less literate parents have difficulty learning to read in school.	83	17	50	50
5. Years of schooling is a clear measure of literacy ability/achievement.	17	83	6	94
6. Children should know the letters of the alphabet and their corresponding sounds before they begin to read.	50	50	17	83
7. It is a good strategy to correct children as soon as they make an oral reading error.	44	56	6	94
8. Less literate adults are generally slow learners.	11	89	6	94
9. Encouraging children to sound out words is one of the best approaches to helping them learn to read.	78	22	44	56
10. Reading to children provides a solid literacy base for formal reading instruction.	50	50	100	0
11. Learning to read or write is systematic and sequential.	83	17	67	33
12. Formal instruction in penmanship is necessary so children can become good writers.	61	39	28	72
13. Single parents are less likely to read to their children than their married peers.	39	61	28	72
14. Illiteracy is a cause of social disfunction.	72	28	28	72
15. A lack of books in the home is a good indicator of a lack of interest in becoming literate.	50	50	28	72
16. Children's early encounters with print should focus on correct word recognition rather than meaning.	72	28	6	94
17. Materials for young children should be written with short simple words and sentences.	50	50	11	89
18. A child's literacy development begins very early in life, possibly at birth.	72	28	100	0
19. Beginning reading and writing practices exhibited by young children result from direct instruction.	44	56	11	89
20. Learning to read is a social process influenced by children's search for meaning.	22	78	94	6

	SA	A	D	SD
21. Parents need to be good readers themselves so they can model reading for their children.	56	44	11	89
22. Rereading favourite stories to children will retard their reading development.	28	72	0	100
23. Learning literacy is a culture-and-value-free activity.	61	39	39	61
24. Environmental print (e.g., road and business signs, labels on products is a good source of text for young children to read.	39	61	94	6
25. Less literate parents are not sufficiently knowledgeable to support the literacy development of their children.	28	72	6	94
26. Children should be encouraged to be quiet and non-interruptive when being read to.	17	83	6	94
27. Reading to a child is a good way to assess his/her reading development.	77	23	94	6
28. Less literate parents need to upgrade their own literacy skills before they can assist their preschoolers develop an understanding of print.	56	44	22	78
29. Poverty is a cause of low literacy.	39	61	78	22
30. The low literacy levels of a significant number of the population is a cause of society's economic difficulties.	83	17	50	50

SA - strongly agree; A - agree; D - disagree; SD = strongly disagree.

Those items that addressed literacy as a socio-cultural phenomenon (5, 14, 15, 20, 23, 29, and 30) were most representative of a change in participants' perspectives. Items 14 and 30 are of particular interest. Pre-workshop responses indicated that the participants generally held perspectives that mirror what is often reported in the popular press; that is, less literate adults are blamed for society's ills. The clients with whom these professionals interact are often unemployed and on social assistance. Many are unemployable because of a variety of social, emotional, or physical reasons. Only slightly more than a third of the respondents initially indicated that poverty was a cause for illiteracy (item 30). After the workshops, more than three quarters of the participants held this view. Similarly, initial responses to item 14 indicate that 72% of participants considered illiteracy as a cause of society's social ills. Only 28% held this perspective in the post-survey.

The apparent swift change in participants' responses from viewing literacy from traditional perspectives to those that view literacy in more comprehensive ways is surprising. Changes in belief systems generally occur rather slowly. One may ask what it was about the workshops that allowed this conceptual shift to take place so rapidly. The activities presented in the workshops placed the participants in literacy situations with which they were not familiar. For example, one activity demanded that they draw rather than write all the literacy events they were involved in both at work and at home during the previous 24 hours (Norton, 1988). The difficulties and frustrations many participants experienced doing this task, as well as their reluctance to show the results of their work to neighbors, were used as the basis for discussion about the literacy behaviors of their less literate clients. Another activity required participants to debate the merits of statements such as "Print is overused in our society as a medium of communication" or "'The less literate population is responsible for most of the crime in our city." Such debates were quite heated as participants took different sides in the discussion and attempted to sway others to accept their points of view. The overall input from the facilitators throughout the workshops, in addition to the participants' experiences with and their discussions of literacy during the sessions, allowed them to come to a new understanding of what it means to be literate and of the role society plays in that development.

Furthermore, participants had the opportunity to reflect on their own practice-how literacy is involved with it-and to discuss this issue with peers. In the workshops, they had occasions to identify how, when, and why they require literacy tasks of their clients, and to explore other means of communication rather than print for providing information. They were provided with the tools to investigate ways and means of collaborating with clients in attending to and completing document literacy tasks. They examined how they could recognize and support the existing positive family behaviors in order to assist in literacy development in the families they serve. They had opportunities to develop their own concrete examples and practical solutions to the literacy issues they face and the literacy issues about which they were previously unaware. In other words, because the workshops were predicated on a participatory model rather than the transmission of literacy knowledge, the facilitators encouraged and modeled what they wished the practitioners to do with their families. Because the community service providers were involved in developing their new awareness for literacy, the change in their perspectives on literacy, and the rate of that change, is not surprising.

Interviews

As noted above, time was provided during the workshops for participants to identify how they might include literacy activities as part of their professional practice. In other words, they were aware of specific ways that they could incorporate literacy events into their professional practice before doing so.

Two women noted that they were not able to put into practice what they had wanted to do. One had changed jobs and was trying to "get a handle" on it before she "got anything going." The other had been ill for about six weeks immediately following the workshops. She was glad that she had been contacted as it reminded her that she had intended to set up a little desk with writing materials in her office for visiting children. For most of the respondents, however, there was overwhelming enthusiasm for discussing the literacy events occurring in their practice.

There appeared to be few differences among the groups of professionals with respect to incorporating literacy into their practices. They included the donated books in their repertoire of professional items and/or left them for client use in waiting rooms. Some even took the time to read a book or a part of one to their child clients during a visit. A few participants organized small lending libraries in their clinics or offices; others set up writing centers where youngsters could draw or write while their parents were being attended to. Two participants were trying to establish a routine of having reading volunteers act as model readers for parents during clinic hours. In short, each of the 14 had found some way to highlight literacy activities in their professional routines. One respondent noted, for example,

> There is one home I go to where there's a new baby and a three-year-old. He's a going concern
> and jealous of the baby. So I give him one of the books to look at while I take care of the
> mom and the baby. When I have finished with them and if there's time, I read the book *to* him.
> If I am rushed, I ask him which page he likes best and we talk for a minute about it.

When asked if she would have acted similarly prior to the workshops, she replied "I never had. I knew it was important to read to kids but I never thought that had anything to do with my work- only for my own kids."

Another respondent was enthusiastic in her discussion about putting the books in her clinic waiting room.

> I never thought that having books in my clinic would have such an effect. I've even had a
> couple of mothers remark that it is great to have something to read to their children while they
> wait. Even those whom I know don't read well look at them with their children.

Another participant commented that as a result of her taking a minute or two to share a book with her child clients, she is now referred to as "the reading nurse."

Other respondents indicated that they had set up a little table in their offices so that visiting children could write or draw when the practitioner was talking to other siblings or their parents. One participant was successful in encouraging her colleagues to set up a lending library of books for interested parents. "Our library is nothing much-about 50 books, but as we see people often on a daily basis, they bring their books back-mostly. We've lost a few, but what the heck, it's worth it."

Many of the participants felt constrained by the lack of human and material resources to put into practice what they now thought to be important. It should be noted that many of those who attended the workshops indicated they were required to share the information they learned with peers in their organizations. However, several noted that the enthusiasm they felt for the topic of literacy got "lost in the translation" to others.

Perhaps more important, interview data highlighted that the majority of the practitioners were more aware of their own behaviors with respect to literacy. Previously, as some respondents noted, they would hand forms to adult clients with a short explanation of how they might complete them. As a result of the workshops, when they felt that their clients were experiencing difficulty with literacy, they spent more time explaining what the forms demanded, or in me instances offered to fill them in for the clients. In addition, the respondents indicated that they made this offer with greater sensitivity than previously. "I'm much more likely to talk through a form now than just ask

someone to fill it in. Sure, it takes more time, but in the long run, we get it done right and perhaps even faster," noted one respondent. Several participants indicated that they were more conscious of how print is presented in their offices or clinics. One woman put the comments of her peers succinctly when stated,

> We used to print everything in capital letters for notices on the bulletin board etc. Now 1 know that just makes it harder for people to read. *So* now, we are more careful about how we post things. We are starting to use colored paper too so that when we phone clients, we can say, "that information is on the yellow sheet we gave you!' 1 think this all helps.

Not all the respondents viewed having a literacy component in their professional practice as a positive move. One woman in particular was of the opinion that it just meant more work for her.

> I have so many clients that I see every day and so many of them are in stressful situations that 1 really am the only person between them and despair. This is hard enough for rite to handle without having to think of literacy. With all the cutbacks and all the extra work we have to do, I don't think we should be asked to involve ourselves in our clients or their children's literacy learning. We are not experts in this field, like you are not in mine. Sometimes, I think I would do mere damage than good pushing literacy on them.

However, such comments were rare; generally those who were cautious about the role of literacy in their practice felt they needed greater support from colleagues who understandably were less enthusiastic than those who had attended the workshops.

Reflection

The results from this study demonstrate the power of literacy in service for community service professionals. Their shift in understanding of literacy and their genuine efforts to incorporate literacy into their practice are encouraging. Whether such perspectives and practices will be maintained over time is difficult to predict. As a result of projects such as Alberta's Action for Health, literacy development is becoming more recognized as a component of healthy communities, highlighting the greater awareness that literacy acquisition is not confined to the schools. There appears to be a growing awareness that the responsibility for moving both children and less literate adults toward more comprehensive literacy abilities rests with the full community,

There may be some argument that encouraging community service providers to bring marginalized families to accept mainstream literacy practices affirms a deficiency model for literacy acquisition. Such an approach may even be viewed as paternalistic. By focusing on practices such as reading to children or involving them in print production practices like list writing, marginalized adults may infer that their current family practices are deficient, On the other hand, it appears that schools are reluctant to change their expectations for children. Therefore, youngsters who live in less literate homes are at a disadvantage as they enter school, where they are expected to have acquired certain skills that middle-class children have already acquired. Delphit (1992) maintains that less fortunate families are advantaged when they are shown how to succeed in mainstream society. The literacy activities suggested and/or modeled by community service providers is a move in that direction while supporting and extending those literacy practices that currently occur families.

Children from poor families may need more extensive exposure to literacy activities for them to achieve success. The community service providers in this study are probably more aware of the negative influences of poverty than others in society. If they are sensitive to the role literacy might play in the lives of their children and adult clients, and if they address literacy in a supportive, considerate, and appreciative manner, they may be advocates for the positive parental routines that these families currently practice as a launch pad for the more exacting academic demands that the school requires. Furthermore, when community service providers are aware of and highlight the use of literacy in their own practice in socially significant ways, they will do more than just suggest add-on literacy tasks to families whose lives are already overburdened. They will demonstrate that literacy is more than successful achievement in school literacy tasks. They will support a perspective that the family and community social contexts are central forces for learning that go well beyond mainstream school literacy practices.

Conclusion

Community service providers who are knowledgeable about how literacy is acquired, who are aware that less literate families may provide an environment conducive to literacy learning outside the practice of literacy itself, and who model the role of literacy in their own professional practices, may open possibilities for their client families that enhance rather than threaten the cultural portraits in those families. The suggestions provided by community service providers for the inclusion of more overt literacy practices in families may establish a range of activities that are safe and enjoyable places for adults and children to explore new ideas together and co-construct new knowledge in their own cultural milieu.

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