Abstract

In recent years the term “family literacy” has become increasingly prevalent. While use of the term has evolved from describing literacy practices in the home to describing educational programs, family literacy is now recognized as being a key component of a child’s success in school. Educators at all levels, from classroom teachers to district personnel, are acutely aware of the need to foster positive relationships with the families they work with, and the need to support those families in their home literacy practices. In the Surrey School District this awareness drives several district initiatives, including the development of a Literacy Growth Continuum and the hosting of both regional and ethnic forums in order to gain parents’ perspectives on key issues in the district. A district wide implementation of a family literacy program could have numerous benefits, but it is the efforts of individual schools in response to the needs of the communities in which they are located which stand to have the most profound effects on students and their families.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ..........................................................................................................................................ii

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................................iii

Acknowledgements .....................................................................................................................iv

Introduction ....................................................................................................................................1

A Brief History of Family Literacy ...........................................................................................2

My Teaching Context ..................................................................................................................4

The Surrey School District: Planning for Student Success ....................................................8

District/School Perceptions ......................................................................................................13

Current District Practices in Family Literacy .........................................................................15

My School ....................................................................................................................................22

My School on the Growth Continuum ....................................................................................29

My Family Literacy Goals ........................................................................................................31

Connecting Theory and Practice – Some Concluding Thoughts .............................................37

Bibliography ...............................................................................................................................41

Appendix A – Making Words Activity #1 ..............................................................................43

Appendix B – Grade One Journals: Looking at Meaning .........................................................44
Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the help of my colleagues and my administrators whose dedication and commitment to providing the best education possible for our students drives them to continually strive to improve their educational practice, especially within the area of family literacy. I would like to thank the Surrey School District personnel who happily provided me with the documents necessary to undertake this project, including the summary statements from the regional and ethnic forums, the Language Report and the Literacy Growth Continuum.
Introduction

In the years since I began my teaching career, it has become increasingly clear to me that teaching involves much more than simply imparting knowledge to a group of children and that the reality of what teaching entails is not fully recognized until one becomes an experienced professional. Children have complex educational needs and their home lives engender additional complexities that are often not adequately addressed in teacher training programs. I have come to realize that while the vast majority of parents and relatives care deeply for their children and want them to become successful adults, often it is the behaviours and attitudes of the family that determine whether or not their children will be successful in school. As a consequence of this awareness of the role of families in the development of literacy skills and ultimately scholastic success, I have become interested in the notion of family literacy, family literacy programs and the roles they play in our education system.

I feel that there are both benefits and disadvantages to focusing on family literacy and implementing family literacy programs. On the positive side, engaged, empowered parents can be champions for their children, enabling them to succeed in school; conversely, many family literacy programs, while implemented with the best of intentions, view families from a deficit perspective which can only serve to further disadvantage all participants.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the practical implementation of family literacy theory in the Surrey School District and my school. Additionally, this paper will 1) describe family literacy in general and the most common approaches to family literacy programs through a brief history of family literacy;
2) describe and evaluate current family literacy trends in the Surrey School District and in the school where I teach using data collected both at the provincial and the district level, focusing specifically on needs and perceptions in relation to families and family literacy;

3) describe my school and the community in which it is located, relating their specific needs to the needs of the district as a whole;

4) outline my school’s current family literacy practices, comparing them to practices at the district level; and

5) outline areas in which I feel that I can work to support my school’s family literacy practices and describe family literacy activities that I plan to incorporate in my own classroom in the next academic year.

A Brief History of Family Literacy

In the past few years, the term “family literacy” has become increasingly prevalent. While the key role that families play in the development of their children’s literacy skills has long been recognized and researched, the term family literacy is relatively new. In the 1980’s several studies of families and their literacy practices (e.g., Bissex, 1980; Heath 1983; Taylor, 1983) showed literacy to be an integral part of daily life, though it occurred in many different ways. Not all researchers at this time used the term family literacy to refer to the activities they observed occurring within families, and Taylor first used the term “to refer to the interplay of literacy activities of children, parents and others” (Hannon, 1999, p.122) in her 1983 book, Family literacy: Young children learning to read and write. Since that time, however, family literacy has become
a term used most often to describe educational programs rather than an area of research. This ambiguous usage of the term family literacy has led to difficulty clearly defining the “phenomenon of family literacy” (Purcell-Gates, 2000, p. 853) and has consequently led to a multitude of approaches and programs designed to target this key literacy area.

From within the variety of family literacy methodologies, three approaches or types of family literacy programs have emerged: programs that reflect practices of accommodation, incorporation and adaptation (Edwards, 2003). *Accommodation* approaches to family literacy reflect the earliest ethnographic studies of families and their literacy practices, whereby homes are understood to incorporate a variety of literacy activities and practices, and teachers and others working with children are encouraged to engage in cultural self-reflection in order to develop strategies to communicate and connect with students from minority populations in order to accommodate their unique approaches to literacy learning within the classroom (Edwards, 2003). *Incorporation* approaches to family literacy seek to build upon families’ experiences, practices, and “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992), so as to develop a mutual understanding of the ways in which literacy is used as a part of cultural practices. Incorporation approaches focus on “re reframing teachers’ aims, commitments, and practices in ways that enable more children to succeed in school” (Edwards, 2003). Finally, the *adaptation* approach focuses on teaching children and their parents the literacy practices (and the culture of power) required to succeed in school, mainly by having parents participate in sessions designed to train them how to read to their children.

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1 In their article, “Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms,” (1992) Moll et. al. use the phrase “funds of knowledge” to refer to “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p.133).
and support other literacy activities. The adaptation approach is the most controversial of the three approaches in that some researchers see the approach as coming from a deficit perspective and warn of a blaming the victim mentality, whereby educators view the families of poor or minority children to be literacy deficient and approach families with “we know, you don’t know” attitude. (Edwards, 2003).

In addition to these three key approaches to family literacy there exists three main types of family literacy programs: those where instruction is given to both adults and children, either together or separately; those where instruction is given solely to adults, with an expectation that the instruction will impact on the children; and those where instruction is given to children only, with an expectation that the instruction will impact on the adults (Purcell-Gates, 2000). There is often a basic adult education or ESL instructional component of family literacy programs, and one fundamental goal is to attempt to change how parents interact with their children and support their literacy development (Hannon, 1999).

**My Teaching Context**

I currently live and teach in the city of Surrey, British Columbia. Surrey is a suburban city with a rapidly growing and changing population. Its current population is 394,976 and it has all the amenities that one would expect to find in a major city: the City of Surrey operates several Community Centres and Libraries, including a popular Arts Centre with a theatre and art gallery. The population of Surrey is composed of numerous ethnic groups including South East Asians (Vietnamese, Thai, Laotian, Burmese), Koreans, Chinese, several African and South American peoples and First
Nations peoples (Statistics Canada, 2007). The largest non-Caucasian ethnic population in Surrey, however, is Indo-Canadian (Statistics Canada, 2007). Reflective of this multicultural population, Surrey has numerous places of worship and many faith based independent schools. Surrey also has a socio-economically diverse population: the city’s population includes the very the wealthy to the working poor and the homeless.

The ethnic diversity of the city is reflected in the population of the Surrey School District. The largest school District in the province of B.C., the Surrey School District has a student population of 65,640. Of that population, 27,500 (41.9%) speak English as a Second Language, with the top six ethno-linguistic groups (from largest to smallest) being Punjabi, Chinese, Hindi, Korean, Filipino and Vietnamese. In total, 12,550 students are from the Punjabi speaking Indo-Canadian community. My school is located in the heart of the Indo-Canadian community and out of a school population of 558 students, approximately 77.6% of our students speak English as a Second Language, the majority of whom speak Punjabi as their first language (Ryan, 2007). The majority of these students are Sikh, but Hindus and Muslims are also well represented. Socio-economically, while not classified as an Inner City school, my school has many of the problems associated with schools serving lower income populations, including poor nutrition, limited extra-curricular activity and limited parent involvement in the school.

One valuable source of information about my school District and the neighbourhood in which my school is located is The British Columbia Atlas of Child Development (2005). The Atlas visually summarizes early childhood development trends across the province in a number of key areas. The information in The Atlas is gathered from numerous sources, both local and provincial, including the kindergarten teachers of
the province of British Columbia who complete the Early Development Instrument (EDI) for each of their students. Five scale measures of development are included on the EDI: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge (Kershaw, Irwin, Trafford & Hertzman, 2005).

On the social competence and emotional maturity scales, 7.96% of the Surrey School District population score as being vulnerable (8.19% for the province overall) (Kershaw et al., 2005, p.34). In terms of social competence, this means that the majority of students in the District are able to demonstrate appropriate behaviour during school activities including self-control and self-confidence. The emotional maturity scale focuses more on behaviour outside of the classroom, such as on the playground, and children who do not score as vulnerable on the scale demonstrate pro-social behaviours, including helping, tolerance and empathy. A moderate percentage, 7.4%, of Surrey students score as vulnerable on the scale (8.02% provincial average) (Kershaw et al., 2005, p. 38). According to The Atlas, social and emotional health are strongly associated with effective parenting practices and a sense of attachment to caregivers.

The language and cognitive development scale measures children’s interest in books, reading and other language related activities, their literacy skills, and their interest in simple math-related activities. A typical child who scores as vulnerable on the scale is one with problems in basic reading, writing and numeracy. In Surrey, 10.26% of the kindergarten student population scored as being vulnerable, higher than the provincial average of 8.15% (Kershaw et al., 2005, p. 42).
The communication and general knowledge component of the EDI measures children's ability to clearly communicate needs in English and their general interest in knowledge about the world. Children who score as being vulnerable typically have poor communication and articulation skills, a limited grasp of English, and limited age-appropriate general knowledge. In Surrey, 10.25% of the kindergarten population scored as being vulnerable, compared to a provincial average of 7.46% (Kershaw et al., 2005, p.46). It is important to note that this scale prioritizes English language skills and that children who speak English as their second language often score as being more vulnerable (Kershaw et al., 2005, p. 46). In fact, vulnerability on this scale is concentrated in small areas of the province, the lower mainland for example, and overall this scale shows that the overwhelming majority of students in the province of British Columbia demonstrate age appropriate communication skills and possess age appropriate general knowledge. This suggests that rather than viewing speaking English as a second language as a deficit and classifying ESL children as vulnerable, a separate scale that measures language learners' communication skills and general knowledge appropriately would be more beneficial.

In looking at the socioeconomic maps of communities in The Atlas, it is important to note that the neighbourhood in which my school is located has a population of greater than 22.8% that fall below the low income cut-off (Kershaw et al., 2005, p.66). In looking at the data available in the Atlas of Child Development, it appears that the two factors that contribute most to the vulnerability of students in my school are a first language other than English, and a low rate of home ownership (Kershaw et al., 2005, p.120). While having a first language other than English does not necessarily make a student vulnerable,
this characteristic deviates from the dominant Anglo-European norm and can undermine
a child’s ability to integrate and succeed in the broader community (Kershaw et al., 2005,
p. 118). A low rate of homeownership reflects the community’s Socio-Economic Status
(SES) as a whole, and contributes to transience within the local schools.

The Surrey School District: Planning for Student Success

Given the broad range of cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, lifestyles
and abilities present within the school District, administrators at all levels must be
proactive in planning for student success. The Surrey School District is committed to
providing high quality programs and instruction that enable all students to be successful.
To that end, the District hosts annual Regional Forums where parents are invited to
discuss current District practices. Discussions are guided by focus questions and range in
topic from student achievement to financial resources. Forums are held in different parts
of the District in order to determine the sentiments of particular socio-economic and
ethnic groups within the District as a whole. In fact, the District alternates between
hosting regional forums (North, South, East, West and Central) and hosting ethnic forums
(Indo-Canadian, Korean, Filipino, etc.). These forums are very popular and help District
personnel identify areas of concern to the parent population. They also provide parents
with an opportunity to be involved in the direction taken by the school District in a small
but significant way. It is important to note that while these forums are well attended, they
are attended by parents who are motivated to attend, and are less effective at reaching less
engaged parent populations, especially those who have very limited English skills and
those who feel disenfranchised, either because of their school experiences (as a student or a parent), or because of their socio-economic status.

By examining parent responses to discussion topics, the needs and wants of the community become clear. For the purposes of this paper, I examined the most recently published Summary Statements from the Surrey West forum (the area in which my school is located) which was held in February, 2006, and the Punjabi forum which was held in February, 2007. During my first reading of these documents, ten themes or areas of concern became apparent. After this initial review of the data, I re-read the Forum summary documents and coded the parents’ responses to the focal questions as they fit into the broad themes I picked out during my first reading. The ten themes that became apparent in the parent responses were parent advisory councils, family involvement, language, students’ future, the education system, culture, pre-school, school work, school (facilities), and social responsibility. Many of these areas are inter-related. Following is a brief summary of parent responses for each theme area, listed in the order in which the themes appeared in the discussion.

Parent advisory councils. The overarching sentiment from parents about school Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) was that the meetings are boring. They expressed a desire to have PAC meetings with a specific focus, where parents could get together to learn something or to discuss a relevant topic. Many parents suggested having meetings where parents could interact more, learn something and have fun. Frustration was

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2 After I read through the forum summaries and coded the parent responses, I had a colleague read through the data in order to check for inter-rater agreement. While she grouped what I termed to be comments about the education system and school work into one category she called educational programs, our coding was consistent. Our level of agreement was 80%, meaning that we scored 8 out of every 10 comments in the same way.

3 All information and quotes for this section are taken from the summary of the Surrey West Regional Forum held in February of 2006, published by the Surrey School District.
expressed with the focus of many PACs on fundraising and lice checks. Other parents were concerned that schools are not finding ways to engage parents who are not active members of the PAC. They wanted to address the issue that parents who are less involved in the school feel that they do not have enough information about what is going on at school. Further, parents wanted the times PAC meetings are held to be varied in order to allow working parents to attend and they expressed a desire for an interpreter to be present at the meetings, or for minutes to be translated into Punjabi (School District No. 36, Surrey, 2006).

**Family involvement.** Firstly, parents in attendance at these forums felt that parent involvement in the Surrey School District was welcomed and that the District had improved in this area over the past few years. That said, many different issues came up during the discussion. Parents felt that while schools adequately meet students’ needs, they do not necessarily meet parents’ needs. The desire to improve teacher/school and parent communication was expressed by several participants and many mentioned the need to reach out to grandparents because in many cases they take primary responsibility for the care of the children. Forum participants had many interesting suggestions on how to get parents and grandparents involved in the school. Several people suggested literacy and multi-cultural nights and others had more specific ideas. Having a “take your parent to school day” was felt to be a way to introduce families to how Canadian teachers teach and how their child learns in the classroom. One parent expressed this idea succinctly: “I would like to see a program where more parents can have a role in the classroom and their child’s learning. If the parent has an idea of what the child is supposed to be doing, they can help more. Maybe a parent/child day at school [sic].” Time and commitment
were expressed as possible barriers to such programs with parents wanting lots of advance notice about upcoming events so that they could adjust their work schedules. Improved technology (consistently updated websites, for example) was mentioned as a way to improve communication and many parents felt that the District forums were a great way to involve parents and were curious as to whether or not they could bring their own questions to discuss (which they can) (School District No. 36, Surrey, 2006).

**Language.** Many of the forum participants spoke English as a Second Language and consequently, language was a theme that appeared throughout the discussion. Some parents were concerned about adequate in-school ESL support for their children, but the majority of parents expressed concern about their own language skills. They felt that their children were learning English but that they, as parents, still had a significant English language deficit. Translation and multi-lingual teachers were common suggestions, especially when involving the grandparents in school activities. On a somewhat different topic, some parents said that they don’t read at home (in any language) because they don’t know how to read (School District No. 36, Surrey, 2006).

**The future.** The future was not a dominant theme, but parents did express concern about their children’s future, both as students and graduates. The transition from elementary school to high school was a concern as was the need to prepare students for multiple roles in society and the work force. Parents recognized that the skills their children will need in order to be successful are different than the skills they needed to possess for the completion of high school, and expressed a desire for schools, especially high schools, to teach their children the skills that they will need for the work force. (Surrey School District No. 36, Surrey, 2006).
The education system. Parents felt that students learn the patterns of behaviour established in the schools but expressed concern that many parents don't fully understand the Canadian education system. They felt that orientation sessions for new parents were essential, and they wanted a session that explains the different bodies of the school system (the School Board, PAC, etc.) and suggested that the District publish a booklet that outlines the programs and services that parents can access. One parent mentioned that because the Canadian and Indian school systems are so different, (views on discipline, for example), many parents do not know what to expect from the school and are often confused about how things work (School District No. 36, Surrey, 2006).

Culture. Culture featured prominently in the discussion. The desire for more multicultural workers was expressed several times by different parents, but other parents were more concerned about the place of culture in the school system. Some parents felt that the District is culturally progressive, providing many activities that respect and celebrate the diversity of Surrey's schools. Other parents disagreed and felt that schools needed to focus on the "basics" and leave some cultural teaching to the community. A few parents felt that schools put too much emphasis on Aboriginal culture. Parents of students attending culturally diverse high schools wanted cultural issues/tensions addressed in a timely manner (Surrey School District No. 36, Surrey, 2006).

Pre-school. Pre-school programs were another minor theme: parents felt that investing in children before they start school pays off and that programs like Ready, Set, Learn were valuable. It was suggested that neighbourhood schools identify pre-school aged children in need of extra support and send home materials to help their parents prepare them for school. It is important to note that this suggestion is perhaps overly
optimistic given that many of the children who arrive in kindergarten unprepared come from families who would struggle to use any materials sent home. (Surrey School District No. 36, Surrey, 2006).

**School work.** Schoolwork was mentioned in relation to parents not fully understanding what was expected of them and their children. The desire for more homework was also expressed. It should be remembered that the parents participating in the forums, for the most part, are literate and are able to help their children at home. It is not clear from the district forums whether those parents who struggle with literacy themselves would like to see their children have more homework. (Surrey School District No. 36, Surrey, 2006).

**School facilities.** Forum participants mentioned a desire to have more Punjabi speaking teachers and administrators. They also wanted schools to have secretaries with welcoming attitudes towards parents (Surrey School District No. 36, Surrey, 2006).

**Social responsibility.** Social responsibility was an area that parents were deeply concerned about. They hoped that their children’s schools were helping them develop confidence in their abilities in addition to competence in academic areas. Parents recognized that the teaching social responsibility must start at a young age, and concern was expressed about working parents (especially mothers) not being able to fill in any gaps left by the school (Surrey School District No. 36, Surrey, 2006).

**District/School Perceptions**

Not only does the Surrey School District host parent forums in order to gauge parent perceptions of progress in the District, but the District is also working to develop a
Growth Continuum for Literacy in Surrey. The purpose of developing the continuum is to provide a focus for school and District conversations about literacy. The District hopes that it will be used as a tool for reflection and planning at the school level, particularly in relation to school growth plans.

Similar to the B.C. Performance Standards, the continuum is divided into four levels of achievement: just beginning/little evidence, on our way/some evidence, well on our way/strong evidence, and extensively implemented/outstanding evidence. One of the areas targeted by the growth continuum is the home/school community partnership (Surrey School District No. 36, Surrey, 2006).

Seven schools participated in the first round of discussions surrounding the development and implementation of the Growth Continuum. Of the seven participating schools, three felt that they understand the importance of parent involvement (just beginning/little evidence), and three felt that their school provides a welcoming and respectful setting for parent participation (on our way/some evidence). Only one school felt that they actively engage with parents to discuss their beliefs, practices, and questions about literacy learning (well on our way/strong evidence). Four of the seven schools felt that they provide parents with ways to help their children develop literacy skills (on our way/some evidence) but only one provides workshops and outreach activities to meet parents’ needs around literacy issues (well on our way/strong evidence) (Surrey School District No. 36, Surrey, 2006).

While all of the participating schools felt that parent involvement is important, their self-assessments reveal that they have a long way to go before their parent communities are actively and productively involved in school and family literacy
activities. It is significant, however, that the home/school community partnership is seen as an important part of literacy in the schools.

**Current District Practices in Family Literacy**

It is clear, reading through both the parent and school perceptions of literacy in the Surrey School District, that some sort of family literacy program, or family literacy initiative, could be beneficial. Schools participating in the development of the District’s Literacy Growth Continuum felt that while they were aware of the importance of parent inclusion and involvement, they needed to improve in developing the home/school partnership. Parents, in response to questions posed by District personnel, communicated a need for parents to be included in schools and expressed a desire for improved communications between schools and families.

Many of the issues raised by Surrey parents can be addressed without the implementation of a family literacy program. Parent Advisory Councils, seen as being boring and too focused on fundraising, could be changed to incorporate other activities that would appeal to a larger audience. Many parents wanted more information about the Canadian school system in general and about how the Surrey School District works specifically. These areas could easily be addressed through the publication of pamphlets or videos, or through other forms of media. Language barriers were a major issue for parents with the desire for more translation being mentioned repeatedly. With improved government funding and/or creative District fiscal management, more of this kind of service could be provided.
Other parent issues, however, would be most effectively addressed by the development of a family literacy program. Parents who felt that they could not help their children because of their own lack of English skills, parents who did not understand what was expected of them, and parents who wanted to help but do not know how could all be helped through a family literacy program. In the selection or development of such a program, it would be important to note the value of grandparents in many of Surrey’s communities, and perhaps to extend thinking to other extended family members and caregivers as well.

The Surrey School District is continually striving to improve the education and services it provides and is acutely aware of the need to adapt to growth and change. The inclusion of parents in a meaningful way and the improvement of student literacy skills are important to both District and individual school personnel. To that end, in May of 2002, District staff, including teachers, administrators, multicultural workers and PAC members, attended a workshop on Project FLAME. Project FLAME is a family literacy program that was developed by Flora Rodriguez-Brown and Timothy Shanahan at the University of Illinois at Chicago based on the belief that “parents can have a positive effect on their children’s learning and school achievement by providing a supportive home environment and serving as confident, successful learner models” (Rodriguez-Brown, Shanahan & Wagner, 1999, p.1). Parents are seen as playing a major part in the literacy development of their children in that they play many different roles including meeting the physical and emotional needs of their children, acting as a liaison between the home and the school, providing space and materials for literacy and play, teaching
their children (directly and indirectly), and supporting their children through their involvement with the school itself (Rodriguez-Brown et al., 1999).

Successful family literacy programs address parents' goals, value home language, act as a resource model rather than a deficit model, and encourage shared literacy in the home (Rodriguez-Brown et al., 1999). Reflecting on these characteristics, the developers of Project FLAME have based their program on four assumptions: 1) a supportive home environment is essential to children's literacy development, 2) parents can have a positive effect on their children's learning, 3) parents who are successful and confident learners are the most effective teachers of their children, and 4) literacy is the subject most likely to be influenced by the social and cultural context of family (Shanahan, Mulhern & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995, p.587). Project FLAME is designed to target the parents of English as a Second Language students and the program objectives reflect this focus on parents with three of the four stated program goals aiming to improve both the confidence and the literacy skills of the participating parents. The fourth stated program goal is that the children of these ESL parents will realize improvement in school through their parents' increased knowledge and confidence (Rodriguez-Brown et al., 1999).

In twelve family literacy sessions, Project FLAME aims to teach parents specific literacy skills such as reading aloud, word games and how to access literacy resources in the community. The program is also designed to improve home-school communication, and therefore tours of schools and classroom observations are also components of the parent sessions. English as a Second Language classes are an integral part of Project FLAME and in some locations, offer a GED preparation or basic skills component as well (Rodriguez-Brown et al., 1999). Inclusion of education of this kind is done for two
reasons: firstly ESL instruction is viewed as an incentive for parents in order to get them
to participate in the family literacy sessions, and secondly the program developers believe
that parents are better able to help their children when they are able to view themselves as
learners (Shanahan et al., 1995). Family literacy sessions are most often conducted in the
parents’ first language and parents are encouraged to conduct their home literacy
activities in their most proficient language. The use of first language is encouraged
because it allows parents to foster their children’s learning through talking, reading and
writing without struggling to use their second language (Shanahan et al., 1995).

While it is noteworthy that:

“rather than rely on a relatively homogenous and homeostatic model that can be
packaged and shipped all across the U.S. (or indeed the world), family literacy
educators need to attend to the ever-present and ever shifting richness,
complexity, and diversity in people’s lives,” (Hendrix, 2000, p.345)

Project FLAME does have many aspects that make it appropriate for use in the Surrey
context. The English as a Second Language component, for example, would appeal to a
large majority of the participant families. Further, an ESL component would help
communication between parents and schools by helping to improve the parents’ English
skills. A basic skills focus on learning how to read would greatly empower parents who
are currently unable to read. The emphasis on the use of the families’ first language
would appeal to program participants, especially those who felt that the Surrey School
District is lacking in translation services. The program’s “Transmission of School
Practices Model” (Auerbach, 1989, p.169) leaning would appeal to the parents’ desire for
more homework and a greater role in their child's education, providing them with clear steps and expectations.

Despite the many advantages of implementing Project FLAME, I don't believe that it is ideal for use in the Surrey School District. Project FLAME was originally developed for the relatively homogeneous Latino communities of Chicago, whereas the Surrey School District is multi-ethnic and a program developed with a specific community in mind would not be relevant for many of the cultures represented in the District.

While the program's emphasis on use of families' first language would appeal to the majority of parents, I think that implementing such an approach would be unrealistic for the Surrey School District. Firstly, the number of different languages spoken in the District would require materials and instructors from such diverse backgrounds that the District would have a very difficult time providing this service. Secondly, many schools in the District have populations that are very diverse. It would be very difficult for a single school to run a Project FLAME session in the first language of all the parent participants because multiple languages would need to be used. Sessions could be held separately but this would be very time consuming and would defeat any community building goal of implementing a family literacy program.

The parent sessions, while interesting and valuable, would likely not improve the overall literacy performance of either the parents or the students in the Surrey School District – I think that a program which kept in mind Moll's vision of "funds of knowledge" would be much more successful, building on the strengths of the community and using the skills and abilities inherent within it. During the parent forums, many
parents expressed concern about the teaching of culture and the problems that can arise due to the number of different cultures represented in schools. I think that a program that didn’t take into account the diversity of the parent participants would not be beneficial or successful. The District would be better off if it implemented some of the parent suggestions (bring your parent to school day and holding information sessions on how the education system and the District work, for example), and by providing low cost ESL courses for parents, rather than if it implemented a program that is not suitable.

Similarly, while the Project FLAME workshop attendees from the Surrey School District enjoyed the workshop and responded positively to the Project FLAME program, doubts were raised as to how the model could be implemented by the District. As such, the English as a Second Language helping teacher and a teacher in the District adapted the Project FLAME model to more closely suit the needs of the Surrey School District (Turner and Lee, 2003). The resulting adaptation is known as Project SPARK (Supporting Parents Actively Reading with Kids), a family literacy program which consists of a “series of interactive literacy sessions aimed a fostering and promoting positive home/school partnerships” (Turner et al., 2003, p.3).

Designed for ESL kindergarten students and their parents (though other parents are not excluded), Project SPARK has three goals: to help parents develop a better understanding of how they can support their children’s learning at home, to help parents understand the importance of sharing books with their children, and to promote schools as welcoming places (Turner et al., 2003). Sessions are led by kindergarten teachers, are one hour in length held during the school day, and are designed to be held every second week beginning in January. The ten pre-planned sessions range in topic from “Warm
Clothes” to “Fun with Munch,” and all include a family fun activity done during the session and a take home component (Turner et al., 2003). Like Project FLAME, Project SPARK includes a section on Assessment and Evaluation and a comprehensive section on resources to support the program.

Despite being developed by Surrey School District personnel for use in Surrey Schools, Project SPARK has not been implemented on a large scale. Many schools with high ESL student populations have used the program but many have further adapted the program to suit their particular school’s needs. Some schools have developed their own completely separate family literacy programs, and other schools do not have established family literacy programs. This diversity, I think, reflects the diversity of the District as a whole. Just as a family literacy program designed for a different audience is not entirely useful in the Surrey context, programs designed by individual schools are not necessarily useful for other schools with different needs. While Project SPARK addresses some of the community’s needs which Project FLAME does not, it still does not attend to many of the key areas of need raised by parents at the District forums. Project SPARK’s advantages and disadvantages are outlined below.

One of Project SPARK’s strengths lies is in the way it designed to be implemented. Sessions are meant to take place during the school day, in the kindergarten classroom, while the kindergarten children are in attendance. Parents, or any other available caregiver or family member are invited to attend, as are younger siblings. If conducted as intended, the Project SPARK sessions address many parent needs, such as an improvement of parent-teacher communication, getting grandparents involved, giving parents a better idea about how the Canadian education system works by having them in
their child's classroom with their child's teacher, providing activities to take home for homework, and reaching pre-school aged children. Further, the program's predictable schedule (every second week) allows for parents to make arrangements with their employers to enable them to attend at least some of the sessions.

Nevertheless, Project SPARK still has limitations: it does not address the needs of parents with limited English language skills or those that are unable to read (there is no ESL or basic skills teaching component); it is not run in the parents' first language or with translators (although some schools may chose to make these adaptations); and most importantly it is very limited in scope, designed to be implemented with kindergarten children and their families only. Project SPARK also does not address any of the parent concerns surrounding culture, PAC committees or social responsibility.

My School

I teach at a large elementary school in the West of Surrey. We have a school population of 558 students, 77.6% of whom speak English as a Second Language (Ryan, 2007). While we are not classified as an inner city school, according to the Atlas of Child Development (2005) over 22.8% of the community in which my school is located fall below the low-income cut-off (p. 66), which accounts for the inner city school characteristics found there. We have a core school community which remains stable from year to year, but we also experience a fair amount of transience, with students moving in and out of the school at all times during the school year. Nutrition is often a problem for our students and many families use the food bank for basic food needs, and others eat nutritionally unbalanced meals. As a whole, our student population is in good health, but
overall dental health is poor. The vast majority of our students are well cared for by their immediate or extended families, and as such, have good social and emotional health. In the primary grades, students are either driven to school or they walk with their parents or grandparents. Older children often walk younger siblings to school or they occasionally come alone, but there is a large adult presence both before and after school. Teachers and parents struggle with language barriers, but for the most part interactions are positive.

Teachers in my school have recognized the importance of involving families in their children’s education for a long time and has put forth great effort into developing and implementing practices that engage and empower our parent community. We have tried to be wide ranging in our approaches to working with parents in order to reach as many as possible, and have used a wide variety of information to guide our decision making processes, including the District Forum summaries, informal discussions with parents, academic articles and personal experience.

Using the ten themes from the District Forum summaries, I will discuss the practices my school uses in order to improve our relationships with the families we work with and to improve our students’ overall literacy skills and success.

**Parent Advisory Councils (PACs).** My school recognizes the problems traditionally associated with PAC committees, but is still quite traditional in its implementation and use of the PAC committee. While lice checks are not on the PAC meeting agendas, fundraising, though limited in scope at my school, is a central theme with the PAC members trying to organize various activities. Both the teachers and the administrators at my school have tried to promote joining the PAC committee to our parent population as a worthwhile activity and parents are often individually invited to
attend meetings. The meetings are held at various times during the day in an attempt to allow working parents to attend, and out of school children are always welcome to attend with grade seven leadership students often invited to baby-sit. We are aware that our PAC is still limited in focus, and recognize that we still have a lot of work to do in order to address the needs of our school community. We have recently begun hosting Community Chat nights where parents are invited to participate in seminars and workshops on various topics of interest to the community. A future step in reforming the way our PAC functions could be to integrate these Community Chats with PAC meetings.

**Family involvement.** In general, we have attempted to create an environment that is conducive to family involvement. Firstly, our school has an “open door policy,” meaning that children are able to come into the school before the bell rings in the morning, provided they are accompanied by a parent (or grandparent, or other caregiver). Often, every classroom has several children either reading, checking homework or doing classroom chores with their parents. From the first bell (8:40am) until 9:00am every class participates in what we call noisy reading, where students can read in small groups or with their family members. This is a popular time of day, with many caregivers choosing to stay in the classroom to either read to their child or have their child read to them. We have also found that this time is a good time to model effective reading behaviours with children. By joining a group of children who are not reading with caregivers and reading and talking about books with them, teachers are able to unobtrusively model reading strategies for parents. This informal morning reading session provides an excellent opportunity for teachers to touch base with parents. We are often able to have quick conversations with parents to touch base about various things happening in the classroom.
(“have you seen the swimming lessons permission form?”) and about student behaviour and progress (“has your son ever had his vision checked?”). In many primary classrooms, parents stay beyond this morning reading time to observe morning routines (calendar, morning message, etc.) and leave once the children are engaged in activity. This is an excellent way for caregivers to observe how students behave in the classroom and what teachers expect both in terms of behaviour and in the way of academic performance.

Every fall, we host a back-to-school, meet-the-teacher, multi-cultural potluck evening. This event is very popular, filling the school both with food and numerous family members. We have found this event to be a great way for teachers and parents to interact, for students to show their parents around, and for parents to meet and socialize with each other. Individual classes also occasionally host evenings where parents are invited to celebrate activities happening within the classroom, for example by listening to children read stories or poems they have been writing in class. We have also recently begun hosting Community Chat nights where parents are invited to attend workshops on issues surrounding their students’ education and wellbeing. Topics this year included “drugs and alcohol,” “nutrition and diet,” and “the Internet.” Finally, during report card season, while teachers still make themselves available for traditional parent/teacher interviews, many classes are now conducting student-led conferences where the students take charge and show their parent, or grandparent or other relative, around the classroom and to see the work they have been doing. We have found that more parents come in when the student is in charge, and by being in the classroom looking at the work the class has been doing, parents better understand the kinds of things we do at school and what is expected of their child.
Language. With such a large English as a Second Language population, we have had to put a lot of thought into how we engage and interact with parents. While our administration is legally unable to hire staff based on the languages candidates speak, we do have a fair number of staff members who speak Punjabi. These teachers have been placed in classrooms throughout the school so that each area of the school has at least one teacher who is able to translate, at least on a basic level, for teachers and parents. We have one multicultural worker who is assigned to our school one afternoon per week, which is typical for the District. With such limited time, we try our best to maximize her effectiveness by always scheduling parent/teacher conferences for the day when our multicultural worker is at the school, by holding school base team meetings when she is at the school whenever possible, by holding Project SPARK sessions while she is at the school, and by conducting new kindergarten student orientations while she is at the school. In addition, we are able to book parent meetings at other times by contacting our multicultural worker and scheduling an appointment when she is available. We are also working on other methods to incorporate our students' home languages at school; for example, our librarian is developing a dual language book collection, with books from as many of our students' first languages as possible.

The future. All classroom teachers incorporate discussions and activities about occupations, jobs in the community, and student strengths and interests. Our grade seven teachers work closely with each other and with our catchment high-schools to ensure as smooth a transition as possible from elementary school to high school by inviting former students back to the school to talk about their transition experiences, by bringing their current students to the high-school for tours and information sessions, and by meeting
with the counselors from the high-school to discuss each student's possible strengths and challenges.

The education system. While we do not have specific strategies in place to address parent questions or concerns about the Canadian education system, we have found that by creating an open, welcoming environment for parents, our parent community is knowledgeable about what we do at school. Parents often have questions about letter grades (or a lack thereof in the primary grades) and in the past our grade four teachers (the first year when students receive letter grades) have held information sessions about letter grades. Information about letter grades is also sent home to parents by individual teachers and is included in school newsletters during report card season in an effort to reach parents who chose not to, or are unable to attend information sessions. Additionally, teachers are always prepared to answer questions about letter grades during parent/teacher interviews, or in telephone conversations with parents. We also hope that we have created a school community in which parents who do not feel comfortable approaching the school with a question will seek out another parent to ask for clarification.

Culture. We have taken an all-inclusive approach to culture at my school and recognize and celebrate cultural and religious happenings from groups represented at our school, as well as from other groups. Our music teacher incorporates music from around the world in his lessons, and classroom teachers use multicultural literature as another way to broaden our students understanding of their world. We have a small aboriginal population at my school and our Aboriginal support worker has organized activities for these students individually, as a group, as a part of their regular classroom, for other
classes and for the school as a whole so as to expand our knowledge about First Nations cultures.

Pre-school. The majority of our students enter kindergarten without formal pre-school experience. While we understand that pre-school is not always feasible or desirable for our families, we try to promote pre-school type activities for young children in our community. Our primary classes are welcoming with younger siblings invited to participate in our morning noisy reading. We also have a central primary play area within the school which is inviting for pre-school children. This area is often filled with younger siblings playing before and after school. Our school also actively promotes programs like “Success by Six” and “Ready, Set, Learn,” in addition to Project SPARK.

School work. Homework is an area which has not been addressed in any formal way by my school, with individual teachers planning and discussing with parents as necessary.

School facilities. This is an area over which my school does not have much control. While we are unable to hand select staff or administration, we do dedicate time during staff meetings and on professional development days to discussing what we value as a staff and how we can continue to improve our relationships with our students and their caregivers.

Social responsibility. Our school has worked in the area of social responsibility separately from family literacy. In addition to classroom based activities, we have created multi-age groupings which meet once monthly, peer-tutoring partnerships which meet weekly and regularly participate in Roots of Empathy sessions. While this work has been done at a school level, we have shared what we’ve been doing with our parent
community and invited them to participate in activities as appropriate. We know that
social responsibility is an important issue for parents and we try to demonstrate that it is a
key area for the school as well.

My School on the Growth Continuum

While my school has put forth a strong and consistent effort in making our school
a welcoming place for parents and has worked to develop our relationships with parents
and caregivers, we have not done much beyond implementing Project SPARK in order to
specifically target family literacy. While my school was not one of the schools selected to
pilot the Literacy Growth Continuum, we are aware that the District values the
home/school community partnership as a key component of literacy development, and
understand that the continuum is meant to provide a focus for discussions about literacy.
Although still in development, the Literacy Growth Continuum is a valuable tool for
evaluating achievement in terms of family literacy because it gives clear descriptors of
what family literacy looks like at the different points along the continuum, in addition to
showing its users what characteristics a higher level of achievement demonstrates. If we
as a school were to score ourselves on the home/school community partnership section
of Surrey’s Literacy Growth Continuum, our results would be mixed. The home/school
community aspect is divided into two separate categories: firstly, assessing the school
environment and parent participation; secondly, looking more specifically at parents as
partners in developing their children’s literacy skills. My school scores as being well on
our way/strong evidence\textsuperscript{4} for the first aspect of the partnership. We understand the importance of parent involvement in children’s literacy and learning, we provide a welcoming and respectful setting for parent participation and we continually work to engage with parents in discussions about their beliefs, questions and practices surrounding literacy learning. My school does not score as highly on the second aspect of the partnership which looks specifically at parents as partners in developing their children’s literacy skills, demonstrating a level of just beginning/little evidence. Parents are made aware of their important role in developing their child’s literacy, but for the most part, are not provided with ways to help their children develop skills in literacy. It is clear then, that even though as a school we feel we are doing lots to improve family literacy, we have a lot more work to do. As a school we need to continue improving our practice and developing strategies to work with parents to improve our students’ literacy skills. While some of this work can be done on a whole school level, I believe that individual classroom teachers, or teachers working in small groups (by grade for example) will be better able to target activities to the needs of their students and can implement strategies much more quickly than whole school projects. It is with that in mind that I plan on implementing some activities within my own classroom over the next few years in order to start taking the steps necessary to improve my students’ overall literacy skills and their families’ literacy practices.

\textsuperscript{4} These performance descriptors are taken from the Literacy Growth Continuum developed by the Surrey School District (2006). An in depth description of the continuum and its performance indicators can be found on page 13 of this paper.
My Family Literacy Goals

My approach to family literacy reflects a combination of the three main types of family literacy approaches. As with accommodation methodology, I believe that a variety of literacy activities already occur in most homes and that it is important for educators to look beyond traditional notions of literacy practices in order to connect with students and their families. Examples of non-traditional home literacy activities might include reading environmental print on packages and signs, collecting coupons or looking through flyers for sales, and reading the television listings (Edwards, 2003). Like incorporation practitioners, I feel that it is important to draw upon students’ and families’ funds of knowledge and to develop a mutual understanding of the ways in which literacy is used. Incorporation requires building strong relationships with parents and their children in order to open “new avenues of communication” and to “foster mutual trust” (Edwards, 2003, p.95). Finally, like adaptation proponents, I think that there is a need to teach children and their families how to be successful at school. I am hopeful that a balance can be achieved between the three approaches whereby families’ current literacy practices are respected and their practice can be extended in such a way as to improve the literacy skills needed to succeed at school.

Given that my school is working well towards developing in the majority of the areas seen as needs by the parents who participated in the District forums, the activities I plan on using will focus mainly on the theme of school work and homework because this is an area which as been largely ignored by my school. I know that improving overall family literacy takes much more than simply sending home activities to be completed at
home, but I feel that this is an area where, as an individual, I can begin to make a
difference for my students.

**Family message journals.** While homework is not a key element of my early
primary program, I occasionally send home tasks for my students to complete with the
help of family members. These tasks are usually hands-on, with a focus on parent-child
interaction and fun. Activities have included going through grocery store flyers and
cutting out pictures of food to make a grocery list, using materials at home or materials
sent home from school to create a pattern, playing a math card or dice game, drawing a
picture of a room in the house (like a map), or going through the house to find hazardous
materials (flammable, corrosive, etc.) and making sure they are labeled “do not touch”
and are out of reach. When my students go on extended vacation during the school year
(a common occurrence at my school), I do not send homework packages; rather, I send a
blank notebook in which students are asked, with the help of their parents, to keep a
journal about their trip. The books come back in a variety of different ways: some blank
and unused, and others filled with writing, pictures, recipes and souvenirs. The ones that
come back filled are shared with the rest of the class and are very popular -- students
often ask to read them during independent reading times. I have started, with the
permission of the students, keeping samples of the better notebooks in order to share with
children before they leave for vacation, in the hopes that they will be inspired to create
one of their own. The feedback I get from parents is that they enjoyed working on this
project with their children. I also enjoy reading these journals and would like to find a
way to incorporate their use on a more regular basis and involve more children.
In her article “Family involvement in early writing instruction,” Julie Wollman-Bonilla (2001) describes a project she observed with two first grade classes in the Eastern USA. In these two classes, the children would write journal entries, or letters to their parents on a daily basis in what their teachers called family message journals. In these journals, the children wrote a message to their parents about something that happened at school that day, something they learned, did or thought. Each night a parent was asked to respond. Parents were not told how to respond, but there was a clear expectation that they would participate regardless of their background. The program was highly effective with ninety-five percent of families responding on a regular basis (Wolman-Bonilla, 2001). In reading Wollman-Bonilla’s article I felt that the use of family message journals could be a highly effective tool for getting families involved in their children’s literacy development. I was also struck by the fact that the school in which this study took place had a very small population of students who did not come from Anglo-American backgrounds (~7% African-American, ~3% Asians and ~2% Latinos), and that the majority of students also belonged to the middle-class. In contrast, my school has a small Anglo-Canadian population and while many students belong to the middle-class as well, a higher percentage have a lower socio-economic status.

Since reading Wollman-Bonilla’s article I have wondered how a technique like the use of Family message journals would work in my classroom. While I am aware that the results will be very different in my classroom than in those studied by Wollman-Bonilla, I would nevertheless like to try to implement a Family message journal approach in my classroom. I think that starting by having the students write daily and having the parents respond daily would be overwhelming for everyone involved. Instead, I would
like to start slowly, having students write once a month for the first few months, then increase writing frequency to every two weeks for another few months, then, if the response is enthusiastic, increase the writing frequency to weekly. I think that having students and parents write daily would be too time consuming, both as a classroom activity, and as an additional task parents need to complete at home each night. By starting slowly both my students and their families will be able to adjust to this new kind of homework. This incremental approach will also parallel the increasing skill level of my students, who at the beginning of the year are able to write very little independently, but who at the end of the year write almost entirely independently. While I think that this approach has merit and feel that both students and parents will enjoy the activity, I recognize that there will be inherent difficulties for parents, especially those who cannot read (in English or otherwise). It is my intent to encourage my students to share their entries orally with their families, and to promote family responses in whatever format they are comfortable with, be it writing in English, writing in their first language, or drawing pictures.

**Working with words (teaching about spelling).** At my school, spelling tests are discouraged because as a school we believe, and are supported by research (Rymer & Williams, 2000, Manning & Underbakke, 2005, & Wilde, 1990, for example), that spelling test results are not always indicative of actual spelling development, and that spelling tests do not assess knowledge of spelling, they assess memorization skills. That is not to say that we don’t teach spelling, we just don’t follow the weekly spelling test model. Classes use programs like *Spelling Through Phonics*[^1] (McCracken & McCracken, 2005).

[^1]: *Spelling Through Phonics* focuses on oral lessons where students are taught a letter and its corresponding sound (“m” = mmmm for example). Students then practice writing the letter as they hear it in a word (“do
1996), *Making Words* (Cunningham & Hall, 1994), and *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton & Johnston, 2004) to provide developmentally appropriate spelling instruction. This approach to spelling is much more time consuming than a program where every student learns the same words every week and is assessed using the results of the spelling test, but we have found that our students' spelling skills are stronger and they use what they learn in spelling lessons in their actual writing. While as teachers we know that our approach to teaching spelling is working, our parent community isn’t always as sure. Parents of early primary students often have questions about why we don’t have spelling tests. Many of our students’ parents were educated in formal classroom settings where memorization of the times tables and the weekly spelling list was given high priority. Many students are taught in this manner at home by their parents, coming to school reciting the times tables or spelling words, “c-a-t cat,” without actually understanding what they have learned. While I am happy that my students and their parents are working together at home and I do not want the parents of my students to stop teaching them at home, I would like them, if at all possible, to work with their children in a way that complements what they learn at school. I already spend a good deal of time talking with parents about spelling, showing them what we do in class each day, and assuring them that their child will move from their invented spellings to conventional spelling as we progress through the school year, so introducing spelling activities to do at home would complement these discussions about spelling.

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6 In *Making Words*, students are given a set of letters (a, c, e, h, r, s, and t for example) and then given clues (put “a” and “t” together to make “at,” what other words can you make using “at?”) to help them make as many words as they can using just those letters.

7 In *Words Their Way*, students are assessed to determine their individual spelling developmental level (Emergent, Letter Name-Alphabetic, and Word Pattern stages for example), and are given activities, word sorts being the most common, to help them develop their knowledge of words and spelling.
In class, we use Marlene and Robert McCracken’s program *Spelling Through Phonics*, which is a program where students are taught how to spell by developing an understanding of “how English print works” (McCracken & McCracken, 1996, p.2). Children learn individual consonants and vowels and practice sequencing sounds as part of oral spelling lessons. Students enjoy their spelling work and are able to use what we’ve learned in their independent writing. I would like to try incorporating Cunningham and Hall’s *Making Words* (1994) program as an activity for families to do at home to further practice and develop spelling skills. Incorporating this sort of homework activity will take more than simply sending home photocopied worksheets, since students and parents will have to learn how to use the materials sent home in order use them effectively. To that end, I would like to create a video of a small group of children working through a Making Words lesson that I can send home to parents for them to watch to see how the activities work. Given that I will have to introduce the activities to my students before I send them home, I shouldn’t have much difficulty preparing the video using equipment available at my school. Not all families will have access to the proper equipment at home in order to view the video (DVD player or computer), so I will have to provide an opportunity for parents to view the video at the school. I will also need to stress with families that the purpose of these spelling activities is to have fun and to spend some time together as a family working through them. I do not wish for the activity to feel onerous or difficult, and want parents to enjoy working with their children in this way. Some families will chose not to participate, and others will chose to continue with their more formal approaches to instruction, both of which are acceptable practices. While I would hope that these spelling activities, and indeed any of the family literacy activities sent home,
are enjoyable for families, I know that every home situation is different and that not all families will benefit from or enjoy the activities. A sample Making Words lesson can be found in Appendix A.

**Using rubrics to clarify expectations and results.** When I taught in the intermediate grades, I consistently used rubrics (both teacher and student developed) to evaluate students' performance. I found that this assessment tool helped both the students and their parents to understand what an assignment required and how I determined a result or a letter grade. Since moving to the primary grades, I have not been using assessment rubrics in the same way I used them with older students. I have continued to use them to assess students' progress, but I haven't used them to discuss progress or achievement levels with either the students or their caregivers; however, I have found that many parents come to parent-teacher conferences asking about letter grades (why their child didn’t get any, or how these check marks translate into letter grades), and don’t fully understand what it means to not meet, to approach, to meet, or to exceed grade level expectations, which is the current language used in the Province of British Columbia to describe academic progress and achievement at the primary level. I think that through the increased use of rubrics as a tool to discuss progress and achievement with students and their parents, I will be able to better meet the needs of the parents by allowing them to more fully understand what is expected of their children in a Canadian early primary class. A sample of a typical assessment rubric can be found in Appendix B.

**Connecting Theory and Practice – Some Concluding thoughts**

For some, “family literacy” means literacy activities that happen at home within a family; for others, it means family literacy programs in which families are taught how to
conduct school like activities at home. Due in part to the of the ambiguity of the term "family literacy," theories of family literacy and resulting programs vary greatly, making it difficult for educators to design and implement family literacy programs for their own schools and communities. Researchers approach family literacy studies and programs from different perspectives (accommodation, adaptation or incorporation, for example) and report different findings when discussing similar programs. Further, many studies and methodologies are context specific, and may not be applicable in other situations. The vast majority of family literacy programs target minority, or lower socio-economic status families. The problem is that not all minorities are the same, nor are all socio-economic groups. Additionally, not all members of a minority group or a social class are the same, and the needs of specific communities must be accounted for when developing or implementing any family literacy program. Greenwood and Hickman (1991) propose a research and practice based model for encouraging and developing what they term "parent involvement activities" (p.286). The Surrey School District appears to be implementing this combined approach to family literacy by building on research (such as that developed and implemented in Project FLAME/Project SPARK, and the Literacy Growth Continuum), and context (as with the collection of data from the District Regional Forums), to inform practice and further development.

Just as family literacy has evolved and changed over time, so do schools and communities and their needs and priorities. While the Surrey School District has worked hard to improve its relationship with the parent communities which it serves, it must continue to hold its Regional Forums and collect data from parents on more informal levels in order to provide services that are relevant. The very existence of the forums,
plus the recognition of the importance of the home/community partnership in improving literacy skills, demonstrates a commitment to continuing to improve in this key area. Not only has the Surrey School District demonstrated a commitment to improving family literacy programs, it has shown that it has the required flexibility and willingness to adapt necessary to implement family literacy strategies that are relevant and effective. Key District personnel recognized that Project FLAME was perhaps not the best suited program to address the family literacy needs of the District and worked to develop Project SPARK as an alternative. While not all schools use Project SPARK, its existence proves that there is motivation to find a strategy that works for our District.

I do not think that Project SPARK is the ideal tool for improving family literacy in the district, but I am glad that the program exists and that it can be used as a starting point for individual schools and teachers to discuss approaches to family literacy. These discussions are complemented by the Literacy Growth Continuum currently in development by the District which is meant to springboard discussions about literacy and family literacy. It is through these discussions that schools like mine come to place such importance on the role of the family in the school, and work to develop strategies that suit their own particular community needs. It is by combining research and discussion about practice that teachers, as individuals and as groups (grade, school, district and province), are able to work towards developing effective strategies for involving the parents and caregivers of the students they teach in order to improve overall literacy levels and school success. Currently available family literacy programs can be of high quality and can be successfully used by schools and communities of varying demographics, but in order to truly meet the needs of the communities in which we work, educators must examine the
strengths and needs of their communities and work to develop strategies that are appropriate for their specific circumstances.
Bibliography


Appendix A

Making Words Activity #1

What words can you make with these letters?

Can you find 10 or more?

Here are some hints:

- Start with the word “at,” what letters can you add to make three letter words?

- You can make lots of words that end with “ar,” what words can you find?

- “ash” is another common ending, what words end with “ash?”

Write all of your words here and bring them to class to share with your friends!

I made:
Appendix B

Grade One Journals – Looking at Meaning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Yet Within Expectations</th>
<th>• able to &quot;read&quot; own writing, but meaning might change each time</th>
<th>“I ltpl.” “wd ou km w me?”</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meets Expectations</td>
<td>• sentences or ideas may not be related</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Minimal Level)/</td>
<td>• few details, no development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaching Expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fully Meets Expectations</td>
<td>• sentences or ideas are related</td>
<td>“I have a doll named Kelly. I played with her outside at recess. Amy and Rita played too.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceeds Expectations</td>
<td>• some individuality</td>
<td>“My best friend’s name is Cherry. She is so nice. Friends have to be nice to each other or they won’t want to play. That’s why Cherry is my friend.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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8 Adapted from the grade one BC Writing Performance Standards, 2002.