

SEARCHING FOR COMMON UNDERSTANDING: PARENT AND TEACHER  
BELIEFS ABOUT THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S LITERACY  
DEVELOPMENT

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

Doctor of Philosophy

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Cross-Faculty Inquiry in Education)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

August 2007

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the beliefs and expectations of parents and teachers in an inner city, multicultural elementary school about the role of parents in helping their children's literacy development. A qualitative, case study methodology was used to gather data from 25 parents and 13 teachers in the school. Five support staff members were also interviewed.

The research questions addressed by the study were: 1) What beliefs and expectations do parents and teachers hold about parents' roles in children's early literacy development? 2) What, if any, are the common areas of understanding between parents and teachers that may be used to promote the development of effective parent/teacher partnerships? 3) How can the family literacy programs in the school be adapted to increase the communication alignment between parents and teachers? The responses from participants in the study indicated differences in how parents and teachers perceived the role of the parents in helping their children learn and that these differences had implications for home/school communication and the development of parent/teacher relationships.

Teachers' and parents' perceptions of the parents' role in helping children's literacy development are categorized into four groups: Parent as Carer; Parent as Supporter; Parent as Developer; and Parent as Nurturer. The communication difficulties that existed between the teachers and the parents from each category are discussed. A framework of

analysis was created to consider how the family literacy programs offered in the school afforded opportunities for building common understanding. The study identified some of the difficulties faced by teachers and parents as they work together to support young children's literacy development and suggests ways for bridging and accommodating these differences.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It would have been impossible to conduct this research study without the help of many people. It is with this understanding that I open this report by thanking them for their cooperation and patience.

The teachers, parents and support workers in the school were always extremely generous with their time and support for this project. They gave freely of their comments and opinions and were always ready to help me organize and conduct this research, despite the inconvenience it may have caused them.

Thanks go next to my supervisor and committee members who patiently steered me through the process of designing, conducting and reporting on this research. Through their diligence and thoughtful support they disproved the adage that you cannot teach an old dog new tricks.

Unreserved thanks go, too, to what became known as my personal support team. This team included: my husband, who always maintained a level head despite my occasional outbursts of emotion and who helped me through those turbulent times when I thought I was unable to complete this work; friends who listened patiently as I tried out ideas and who both helped me develop new ways of looking at things and improved my golf game at the same time.

Part of my personal support team consisted of colleagues who were also going through the Ph D process, and with whom I could commiserate, complain, and catch my breath. They deserve my thanks and my support.

Thanks also to Mark Twain, who summarized perfectly what my journey has felt like, when he defined education as the path from cocky ignorance to miserable uncertainty. Twain allowed me to feel that, despite being more aware of what I don't know than when I started this process, I have, in fact, been educated.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

You try to reach out [to parents] ... we are saying [that] we are here to help... but until you actually get them in the door you don't know if you are doing a good job or not doing a good job ... we get them when we need them but if it is for education type of things they don't want to come.  
(School Principal)

### 1. 1. Background to the study

This study stems from my growing understanding of the importance of parental roles in helping children learn, and the complexity of the parent/teacher relationship that supports these roles.

During my years as a teacher of children with learning difficulties I became aware of the ways parents were trying to help their children learn. With help from the provincial teachers' federation, I conducted research into how parent and teacher collaboration around children's literacy learning could be encouraged, and subsequently, provided support to teachers who wanted to increase home/school communication in order to support children's learning. I was aware of the enormous amount of time and effort teachers expended on creating and presenting programs aimed at supporting the parental role in helping children learn and how frustrating it was when, despite their efforts, very few parents participated in the programs. Often, the teachers had done all they could to encourage parents to attend the programs. They were aware that, in a multicultural society, many parents might not be able to speak or read English and the school had therefore translated notices and invitations into different languages; teachers repeatedly reminded the children in the class about the programs and provided childcare, snacks and

gifts in an effort to encourage the parents to attend. Despite all the teachers' efforts, parent participation in the programs remained low.

The teachers, looking for reasons for this low attendance, suggested that parents did not attend the programs because of scheduling difficulties or family and work commitments. On occasion, it was even suggested that the parents did not attend because they did not care about their children's education. I found this last reason difficult to accept.

Although I was sure that parents had difficulties with work and family schedules that might prevent them attending the family literacy programs, I had worked with many parents who had made many sacrifices to ensure that their children were well educated. There had to be other reasons why parents were reluctant to attend the programs. I had noticed that, when a few parents did participate in the programs, they knew little about the education system or what their children were doing in school. It also became apparent that the parents did not understand some of the teachers' suggestions about how they could help their children's literacy development. It occurred to me that there might be differences in what the parents wanted to learn and what the teachers wanted to tell them, and that these differences were part of the reason so few parents attended the family literacy programs. This research was designed to explore this issue further.

## **1. 2. Assumptions behind the study**

Every research study starts with assumptions that need to be made clear. This study is based on the following three assumptions:

- that parents have an important role to play in children's literacy development.

Parents are a child's first literacy teacher; before children enter school they have experienced a wide range of home-based literacy activities and learned about the uses of text (Goodman, 1986). When children enter school, parents continue to support their children's learning in a variety of ways (Porter, 1998), depending on their beliefs about how children learn (Bam, 2005).

- that parents and teachers need to collaborate to support children's learning. The importance of parent/teacher collaboration to support children's learning has long been recognized. As early as 1967, a report from England stressed that one of the essentials for children's educational advance is a closer partnership between parents and teachers (Plowden, 1967).

- that, in order to collaborate, parents and teachers need to have common understanding about the issue in question. In order for parents and teachers to collaborate in children's literacy development, they need to have some common understanding about the parental role in helping children learn.

Miscommunication and misunderstanding may occur when this shared understanding is missing. In looking at the parent teacher relationship in family literacy programs, Edwards (1995) suggests that without deliberate attempts to gain this shared understanding, parents and teachers build up ideas about the other which may further reduce opportunities for developing shared knowledge.

I suggest that it is the lack of shared understanding about the parental role in supporting children's literacy development that leads to lack of effective communication between parents and teachers, and ultimately, to parents' lack of willingness to attend school-based family literacy programs.

### **1. 3. Purpose of this study**

This study explores whether, in a school in which parents come from multi-ethnic backgrounds, there is any shared understanding between parents and the teachers in the school.

The existence of shared understanding between teachers and parents is one foundation of a child's school success (Sonnenshein, 2000). However, research shows that this shared understanding may not always be present; parents and teachers may have a different awareness of how children should be taught (Windrass & Nunes, 2003) or about how parental involvement in school affects their learning (Huss-Keeler, 1997). Teachers may not be aware of how the parents are helping their children learn (Cairney & Ruge, 1997) and may have different beliefs about what constitutes literacy and literacy learning (Hannon & James, 1990). These differences of belief lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication between parents and teachers (Linek, 1997).

The aim of this study to understand whether, in an inner city, multicultural school setting, differences in perception of the parental role in supporting children's literacy development impact parent/teacher relationships.

#### **1. 4. Definitions used in this study**

Throughout this study I use some terms that need to be clarified.

##### **Early literacy**

The term is used to mean young children's ability to make meaning in different social contexts. This term will be explained fully in the literature review.

##### **Early Literacy Development**

Early literacy development is the process by which children acquire the skills they need to read, write and comprehend text. A more complete description of this term is presented in the literature review.

##### **ESL Parents**

Parents whose first language is other than English and who are able to speak and understand English well enough to be able to communicate in English.

##### **Non-English speaking parents**

Parents whose first language is other than English and, although living in Canada, do not have enough confidence in their ability to understand English in a way that allows them to communicate in English.



## Family

The term family will be used to refer to all the members of a child's household and to any extended family members who might be involved with the child in some way.

## Family literacy

Family literacy is the range of activities, inherent in family life, that either consciously or unconsciously contributes to children's literacy development. Examples of these activities include writing a shopping list, reading a magazine, playing games, and the many other family activities that help children understand how language and text can be used to make meaning.

## Family literacy programs

The term family literacy programs is used to describe a range of initiatives that aim to provide parents with the means of developing their children's early literacy. This research describes family literacy programs that take place within the school. These include programs that are school-wide or classroom based, single or repeated events, and that take place during the school day or after school.

## Literacy Development

The term literacy development denotes the progress a child makes in learning how to use and decipher text, become proficient in the use of language and in meaning making.

### Mainstream culture

This refers to the cultural values and beliefs that are supported, either implicitly or explicitly, by the teachers in the school.

### Multicultural Issues

The multicultural issues in this study relate to the parents' differences in experiences of education and education systems rather than language and culture alone. In this case, the word multicultural is taken to refer to families where the children are being educated in Canada and the parents were educated in a different country.

### Common Understanding

This relates to the level of shared conceptual understanding that exists among people.

This conceptual understanding is based on beliefs, experiences and values that have been acquired through prior experience.

### Multiliteracies

The term multiliteracies was coined by the New London Group (1996) to highlight two related aspects of the increasing complexity of texts: (a) the proliferation of multimodal ways of making meaning where the written word is increasingly part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns; (b) the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity characterized by local diversity and global connectedness.

### **1. 5. Statement of the problem**

Parents and teachers need to work together to help young children's literacy development. In an increasingly multicultural world it is important that teachers know how to help parents from different ethnic backgrounds support their children's learning. In order for this collaboration to take place, parents and teachers need to be able to communicate effectively. In a multicultural setting there are barriers to this communication caused by, among other things, differences in language and the parents' lack of understanding of the educational system in which their children are being taught (Edwards, 2004; Porter, 1998; Gadesden, 1996).

In 2002, I worked on a Multiliteracy Research Project (2002) conducted by researchers from the University of British Columbia. My involvement in this project in two schools, each serving a multicultural population, showed that provision of translation and other ways of encouraging parental participation in family literacy programs, while important, was not sufficient to create the effective parent/teacher communication necessary for collaboration to take place.

The question then becomes: How might family literacy programs be adapted to meet the needs of a multicultural population? Results from the Multiliteracy Research Project had shown that despite the many adaptations teachers made to meet the perceived needs of the parents, the teachers did not feel that the programs were successful. I suggest that there may be a deeper issue that is not being addressed. The different beliefs and expectations of parents from different educational backgrounds may result in a lack of

common ground on which parents and teachers can communicate. In order for parents and teachers to work together, to understand each other and learn from each other, there is a need to find common ground on which this collaboration can take place.

#### **1. 6. Research questions.**

The purpose of this study is to provide educators with a better understanding of some of the reasons why parents and teachers may have difficulty collaborating in supporting young children's literacy development. I want to explore whether or not there is any common understanding among teachers' and parents' perceptions of how parents can help children develop literacy, and how family literacy programs may be adapted to increase this shared understanding. In constructing this study, I hope to provide recommendations that will lead to increased parent/teacher collaboration in ways that benefit children's literacy learning.

The research questions addressed by the study are:

1. What beliefs and expectations do parents and teachers hold about a parent's role in children's early literacy development?
2. What, if any, are the common areas of understanding between parents and teachers that may be used to promote the development of effective parent/teacher partnerships?

3. How can the family literacy programs in the school be adapted to increase communication alignment between parents and teachers?

### **1. 7. Significance of this study**

This study builds on the knowledge about parental and family roles in helping children learn. Although I started to investigate the parental roles, it quickly became apparent that other family members are involved in supporting children's literacy development. The data shows that grandparents, uncles and siblings also play a part. In an increasingly multicultural society, it is important that different cultural practices and beliefs are understood so that they can be acknowledged and built upon.

Data from this study highlight the importance of developing an awareness of the need for shared understanding between parents and teachers as a prerequisite for home/school communication around children's learning. With the development of this shared understanding comes the possibility of creating trust between parents, teachers and the school system that allows for the type of social interaction that benefits children's learning.

The study shows that one way to develop shared understanding is through experiential learning between and among different cultures. Acknowledging the existence of different beliefs and values allows parents and teachers to address them in ways that lead to a better understanding of how to help children learn.

The study points to the need for dialogue between parents and teachers, dialogue that will affect the relationship between parents and teachers in ways that benefit children's literacy development.

This study also has personal significance for this researcher as it addresses a question the researcher had pondered for some time, that is, how to find ways of helping parents and teachers understand each other. It will inform my future work with parents and teachers by providing possible ways these two groups, who care so much about children's wellbeing, may be brought more closely together.

### **1. 8. Overview of other chapters**

In Chapter 2, I present five reasons, culled from the literature, which suggest why parent/teacher collaboration supports young children's literacy learning. The literature also suggests that school based family literacy programs are one way of fostering this collaboration. By looking at the different models of family literacy programs, and the assumptions and beliefs on which they are based, I am able to describe the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

In the first part of Chapter 3, I discuss the need for shared understanding between parents and teachers as a prerequisite for the exchange of ideas and knowledge. I then review the literature and present four basic issues that may lead to differences in perception between parents and teachers in regard to how parents support children's learning.

Chapter 4 discusses the research methodology used in this study. I argue that the nature of the questions being researched leads to the need to use the qualitative research approach of a case study and I describe the choice of the case and the sampling procedure taken to ensure the validity of the findings. The data collection procedures of interviews, focus groups, and document retrieval, and the method of data analysis, are described and discussed.

Chapter 5 reports the research data that is used to answer the first research question. This question is answered by presenting both the teachers' and the parents' beliefs and expectations about the role of parents in helping their children develop literacy.

In Chapter 6, the beliefs and expectations of teachers and parents as reported in Chapter 5 are compared and contrasted. The ways in which a lack of common understanding affects parent/teacher communication is discussed, and is related to the family literacy programs in the school. Specifically, a set of questions is presented that can be used to consider the family literacy programs. An analysis of the family literacy programs in the school is reported and the programs considered in terms of their potential to increase shared understanding between teachers and parents.

Chapter 7 summarizes the findings of the study and discusses their implications for future research, and in particular how family literacy programs may be adapted to take account of the amount and type of common ground that exists between the participants. I propose that teachers need to adapt the way they interact with parents, and that parents and

teachers need to have a relationship of trust and shared understanding in order for the family literacy programs to achieve their goals. The chapter concludes with implications for further research.



## **CHAPTER 2: A REVIEW OF PARENT/TEACHER COLLABORATION TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LITERACY**

### **2. 1. Introduction**

Parental involvement in children's learning has long been seen as a way to increase a child's chance of academic success (Hallgarten, 2000). For young children, this involvement centers on literacy and literacy development. There is a general assumption that bringing the literacy learning experiences of the home and the school closer together increases children's ability to benefit from both. However, it is important to understand the basis for this assumption. A review of the literature on parent/teacher collaboration in supporting young children's literacy development shows that there are five reasons why parents and teachers need to work together for the benefit of young children. (Full references for each of these reasons will be found in the following sections).

1) Teachers and parents both have important roles to play in helping young children learn and it is important that these roles are coordinated so that children do not receive mixed messages about what and how to learn.

2) Family members possess many skills that can be used to support children's learning. Parent/teacher collaboration allows teachers to become aware of these funds of knowledge and to incorporate them into their teaching.

3) For young children, the transition from home to school is a significant event and may cause them distress and disrupt their learning. Collaboration between parents and teachers can minimize the effects of this transition.

4) Children may keep their home and school lives separate and not allow any learning they have experienced in the home to be reflected in their schoolwork, resulting in teachers not understanding what children can do. When parents and teachers work together to help children learn, teachers will be more aware of children's home learning.

5) Parents and teachers have different roles to play in children's literacy development. Collaboration will allow them to understand what each is doing to support children and to coordinate the type of support they offer.

## **2. 2. Parent and teacher collaboration around children's literacy development**

### **2. 2. 1. Parents have a role to play in children's literacy development**

The parental role in helping children learn is complex and includes being a listener, prompter, information giver, asker of questions, and fellow meaning maker. Parents introduce their children to the complexities of language; they communicate with their children and help them make sense of a shared world. Parents do this by selecting, arranging, and using specific experiences. These experiences show children what is valued and what is seen as useful by family members (Cairney, 2003). Children develop their early

literacy skills within families, as part of the social practices of family life and, as such, differences exist in the way literacy is viewed, defined, supported, and used as part of family cultural practice.

Much of this learning takes place before children enter school. Goodman (1986), combining research results from one study of how 78 children developed literacy with results from five similar studies, described the five roots of literacy most Western children learn before they enter school. These roots of literacy provide an overview of the literacy learning children experience within home settings before entering school.

The first root, according to Goodman (1986), is children's development of print awareness in situational contexts. The child develops a schema, a model that includes rules about the features of written language as it appears in his or her life. This learning may occur before either the parents or the children are aware of it, and can be inferred from seeing children play with pencils and pens, and write on scraps of paper, floors and walls. The work the child produces may look like scribble, but it has meaning for the child. Goodman stated that at least 60% of three year-old children could read environmental print when it is embedded in context. The second root refers to the development of print awareness in connected discourse. This occurs when children interact with print material such as storybooks, comic books, and shopping lists. Then children learn that print carries a message, and they also learn the proper orientation of books, for example, that when looking at a book, there is a right and a wrong way to hold it. Next comes the development of the function and forms of writing; children learn that

there is a difference between reading and writing and start to produce symbols on paper. These symbols begin to look like letters, rather than the continuous scribble of the earlier stage of learning. Once children have a concept of written language, they develop the oral language they need to be able to talk about it. They learn to use words such as pencil, read, write, and draw, although at this stage children may still believe that letter and number names are unrelated to reading and writing.

Goodman (1986) concluded by stating that all the evidence indicated that children are inventing, discovering, and developing literacy as they grow up in a literate society, and that they develop many insights about the functions of written language for themselves and for the adults who are important to them. This research highlights the importance of children's preschool experiences to their later literacy development, and shows the importance of the parental roles in helping children learn.

Until fairly recently, there was an assumption that many families from low-income groups did not have the resources to support young children's literacy learning (Heath, 1983). This assumption was challenged by groundbreaking research by Teale (1986), when he described the range of literacy activities that 22 preschool children from low-income families either participated in, or were aware of, at home. These included activities related to daily living, entertainment, school, parents' work, religion, interpersonal communication and reading to keep up with things. There were also some family activities, such as storybook reading, undertaken specifically to help children learn to read and write. Teale noted that the amount of reading activities in the individual

homes varied considerably, but that virtually all children had numerous experiences with written language before they entered school. This finding prompted a reconsideration of the view that children from low socio-economic backgrounds came to school with limited literacy experiences.

A later study by Purcell-Gates (1996) appeared to contradict Teale's (1986) findings.

When looking at the home literacy practices of 24 children from families with low socio-economic backgrounds in the USA, Purcell-Gates found that some children do, in fact, arrive at school with limited literacy experiences. She found that in some families children experienced an average of five literacy events per hour, while in others they encountered less than one literacy event per hour. The types of literacy events in which the families engaged consisted mainly of events related to entertainment and daily living routines, such as reading text on containers, in flyers and coupons, and TV guides and notices.

The children who engaged in few home literacy events had limited awareness of the use of print when they entered school. These findings by Purcell-Gates (1996) showed that emergent literacy appeared to be related to different aspects of home and school literacy experiences. The more literacy experiences the children encountered, the more likely they were to have a better understanding of how literacy worked. She also found that children's literacy development increased when the print to which they were exposed was part of a story or complex dialogue. This finding indicates that the use of environmental print, such as signs and store names, might not be effective in helping children

understand the nature of text. For some children in the study, it was the literacy practices of the school that provided them with the experiences they needed to develop their literacy skills. These results indicate the complexity of how home literacy practices impact children's literacy learning.

Although teachers may no longer consider that poor socio-economic conditions limit children's literacy development, teachers may still have concerns about the amount and quality of learning experiences in the life of a child from a low-income, or immigrant family. Teachers may believe that families from different cultural groups are not providing their children with the range or quality of experiences that children from the mainstream population enjoy. This belief may stem from a lack of awareness of the richness of the experiences these children are engaged in because these experiences are outside the teachers' own life situation. For example, how many teachers are involved, or know about, running a store or a restaurant? It would be unfortunate if teachers did not try to learn more about the life experiences of the students in their class before making judgments about this issue.

Parents and families continue to play a significant role in children's learning when children start formal schooling. According to Klassen-Endrizzi (2000), children spend only 14% of their time in school, indicating the importance of out-of-school learning. The author states that children's literacy learning is not confined to the time they spend in school; it takes place throughout the day, in many different settings, such as reading road signs, writing notes and cards, or reading TV guides. Children learn literacy knowledge

and skills through interactions with more able adults and peers who mediate the construction of meaning by helping to create learning interactions that are meaningful to the child. These learning interactions take place within what Vygotsky (1978) described as a child's zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development is the distance between children's developmental level as determined by their ability to solve problems without adult guidance, and the level of potential development when they collaborate with more capable adults or peers. It is the space where minds meet and new understandings can be created. Vygotsky viewed language as crucial for the development of the child's thinking skills and thought that language was developed during culturally meaningful interactions. Thus, learning occurs as a result of a mix between the content of the learning and the cultural environment in which it takes place; children learn higher-level skills as they are engaged in meaningful literacy activities and this learning provides them with the basis for understanding their environment. Therefore, the family and community continue to exert an influence on children's learning, highlighting the importance of bringing the learning contexts together.

There is clear evidence then that parents are influential in supporting children's literacy development, both before and during school. Parent/teacher collaboration would allow these two learning contexts to be coordinated to the benefit of children's learning.

### **2. 2. 2. Families as funds of knowledge**

A second reason for parents and teachers to work together relates to the accumulated skill and knowledge that resides in families. This skill and knowledge may be used to support children's learning once the teacher is aware of its existence.

Researchers, observing households in Mexican communities within Arizona, found that every household possessed "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992). These funds of knowledge refer to the historically and culturally accumulated bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and wellbeing. The researchers found that families had knowledge pertaining to economic, household management, religion, and work, including material, scientific, agricultural and mining knowledge. Although this study was conducted with a relatively homogeneous group of families, the categorization of the funds of knowledge they possessed could relate to families from a wide variety of backgrounds.

If teachers were aware of the fund of knowledge that resides in families they could encourage parents to share this knowledge with their children, thus increasing the children's learning. Many teachers might believe that, because parents do not talk about their lives and the skills they have, they may be incapable of helping their children learn. The findings by this group of researchers show that families possess knowledge that they can pass on to their children, and which can be used to further children's learning.



### **2. 2. 3. Transition from home to school**

The transition from home to school is a time in a young child's life when he or she is expected to adjust to a new and perhaps frightening reality. He or she has to leave the security of his or her family and enter a situation in which there may be new rules and a different way of being. This transition from home to school can be dramatic for some children. Bronfenbrenner (1986) postulated that it is when children move from one setting to another that they have the greatest potential for either growth or alienation. He states that whether or not children become alienated in their new surroundings depends on two factors. The first factor is how the two settings relate to each other, how well they fit together. When the two situations are similar, children do not have to make too many adjustments and may fit easily into the new situation. However, some children may have to make many adjustments to fit into the new situation. For immigrant children, the culture of the school in their new country may be very different from the culture of the school in their old country, or from the learning ethos of the home, creating challenges, not only for the child, but also for the parents and teachers.

The second factor noted by Bronfenbrenner (1986) is the extent to which the new setting is open or closed to the new cultural differences. In order to be open to the child, it is necessary for teachers to know something about the child's background and experiences in order to know how to help the child adjust to his or her new surroundings. For those children who, on entering school, experience different ways of being, and encounter a new language, incongruities are increased. Knowledge about the literacy practices of the home allow teachers to be more aware of the impact of transition on young children, and

to provide links between the home and the classroom that could ease the frustration and ensure the child's continued learning. Silvern expressed similar ideas in relation to the congruence between home and school environment. He stated that continuity/discontinuity issues between home and school might be considered in two ways. The first of these reflects the characteristics that are correlated with desirable child outcomes. He described these as: reciprocal language interactions between infant and mother; adult-directed experiences; overt affection; free expression of positive and negative feelings; sensitive parents; family unity; and high verbal and emotional exchange. He stated that schools might provide some of these characteristics, thus allowing for congruity between the home and school environments for the child.

However, he stated that this need for congruity between home and school might cause difficulties for children from homes not providing this idealized home setting.

Silvern stated that a second source of discontinuity for children lies within the meanings that children bring from their home in terms of space, time and language. Some families are informal in their use of space: meals may be eaten at the table or in front of the television. In school the use of the physical space is more defined and personal space is more insecure. In homes, time may also be a variable resource, with few limits placed on the lengths of conversations or playtime, and while there may be a set bedtime for the child, wake-up time may be more flexible. In school, time tends to be constrained, with set work and play times and with limits on when activities should be completed.

Differences in language use between home and school also create discontinuity. Family language is based on shared meanings, is contextualized, and each family uses it in its own way, thereby allowing children to construct meaning. In school, language can be

highly de-contextualized, leading to lack of understanding between teacher and child.

Silvern (1988) suggested that family grouping in classes might benefit young children by recreating a language situation with which they are more familiar. He noted that miscommunication may also occur when a child is not yet able to relate to others' perspectives and may result in the child not even recognizing that they are involved in a communicative act. Also, how language is used in school may be so different from the communication in the home that it has no meaning for the child. Silvern's analysis is based on children who experience their first language in both home and school, and who come from the mainstream culture where children and families may have the cultural experiences in the home that facilitate children's adjustment to school and academic achievement. The congruence between home and school experiences, described as cultural capital by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), consists of the set of values, beliefs, norms, attitudes, experiences that equip people for their life in society. The term 'cultural capital' is used because, like money, cultural inheritance can be translated into social resources (things like wealth, power and status) and the cultural capital we accumulate from birth can be 'spent' in the education system as we try to achieve things that are considered to be culturally important.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that not all children start with the same kind or level of cultural capital. Children socialized into the dominant culture will have a big advantage over children not socialized into this culture, because schools attempt to reproduce a general set of dominant cultural values and ideas. Incongruity between the home and school literacy learning experiences of children will arise when families have

different perceptions from the school about what constitutes an ideal family, different experiences of time and space, and differences in language and social class, and these incongruities will impede children's learning.

Wells (1986), looking at how children's literacy developed at home and at school, followed 32 children from the ages of one to ten, collecting language and literacy data in both family and school contexts. He found that the children acquired English within a universal pattern of language development, but that there were individual differences in how children followed this pattern, depending on the children's personalities, learning style, and learning environment. He found that environmental differences accounted for the amount of language and written text children experienced. He documented how children had difficulties on entering school when teachers' assumptions about how children develop literacy were inconsistent with the child's ways of constructing knowledge. Although he examined the role of gender and social class in relation to differences among children and their learning, he did not find specific differences in their patterns of learning and suggested that it is individual experiences, rather than social group experiences, that account for differences in how children develop literacy.

Some families are more able than others to facilitate the process of transition for their children. Lareau (1987), drawing on the concept of cultural capital, observed two first grade classrooms where teachers were actively promoting parental involvement in their children's learning, and conducted interviews with parents and teachers over a six-month period. The participants in the study included both middle class and working class parents. Lareau found that teachers in both schools interpreted level of parental

involvement as a reflection of the value parents placed on their children's educational success. The parents' responses showed that both middle class and working class parents wanted their children to be successful in school, but that the way the two sets of parents promoted educational success varied considerably. The working class parents turned over the responsibility of their children's education to teachers, while the middle class parents saw education as a joint enterprise, and this led to more overt involvement in their children's schooling and consequent interaction with teachers. For instance, the middle class parents attended school events more often than the working class parents.

These differences in social, cultural and economic resources help explain differences in parents' response to teacher requests to parents to help their children. In Lareau's (1987) study, when asked to read to their children, working class parents were reluctant to comply because they thought they lacked the necessary skills, while middle class parents were more comfortable doing this. The relatively high occupational position of the middle class parents allowed them to view teachers as equals, and to raise questions and concerns about their children's education, while the lower class parents appeared to rely on the expertise of the teachers to help their children learn.

I suggest that differences in cultural capital may have an impact on parental involvement in some school activities. Those parents whose cultural capital matches those of the teacher will feel more comfortable entering the school building than those parents whose cultural capital differs from that of the teacher. This might account for the difficulty some schools have in attracting working class parents into the school.

A study by Blackledge (2000b), in which he investigated how Bangladeshi mothers in England supported their children's literacy learning, highlighted the differences between home and school literacy practices and the impact these differences had on children's transition from home to school. Blackledge found that, though the Bangladeshi mothers wanted to help their children learn, they did not feel supported by the school. The school sent books home that were written in English, a language they had difficulty reading, and they were not provided with instructions about how to help their children. These mothers felt frustrated and disempowered, because they wanted to help their children's English literacy learning but felt unable to do so. Blackledge suggested several ways schools might overcome this barrier to parents with limited English language skills who wanted to help their children learn. He suggested that the school could provide the parents with books that were written in their first language and that children and families could be encouraged to join a library where books in their first language might be available. These suggestions of Blackledge referred to a school where most of the parents spoke the same first language, and therefore, that school would only have to provide books in that language. It would be very costly for schools, where parents speak many different first languages, to provide books in all the first languages of the parents. The provision of sufficient books to support home literacy learning in one or two extra languages might be within the means of many schools, but when schools are catering to parents from many different cultures and with many different languages, this may be difficult to achieve. Blackledge's suggestion that parents be encouraged to join a library depends on the

library having the kind of books that meet the parents' needs, and the parents having enough proficiency in English to be able to negotiate the library system.

McNaughton (1995) described the different perceptions of Maori parents and Anglo/European parents about how children learn. Maori parents, similarly to the working class parents in Lareau's (1987) study, believed that their children would learn to read and write when they were ready, and that it was the teachers' responsibility to promote children's reading and writing skills. Anglo/European parents, on the other hand, tended to prepare their children for school by teaching their children how to write their name. McNaughton also found that Maori parents tended to differentiate between teaching and care giving more than Anglo/European parents and that this differentiation was associated with trust in, and deference to, the schoolteacher's expertise.

Based on these findings, McNaughton (2001) described three general strategies that may be adopted in order to ease the transition from home to school of children from diverse backgrounds. The first strategy involved increasing the frequency and style of reading, typically storybooks, to preschoolers at home. The second strategy involved modifying classroom practices to better match the practices of the family and community, and the third strategy involved doing both, by creating a shared understanding of the literacy practices of the home and school. McNaughton noted that there were issues connected with each of these approaches. He stated that the suggestion that parents increase their reading of storybooks to children runs the risk of being labeled cultural imperialism, as it may be seen as imposing the way of learning that is accepted by the mainstream onto

minority cultures. He explained that the second strategy could lead to difficulties in the schoolteachers being able to complete the curriculum requirements if time is spent incorporating community literacy practices into the classroom. McNaughton then presented a way of looking at how children learn both in the home and in school that emphasized the links between them. He provided a model of how a child learns that included three aspects of the child's learning situation: personal experiences specific to each child; joint experiences, such as when a mother and child read together or a teacher helps a child; and ambient experiences, where the environment acts to provide learning opportunities. He stated that children experience all these learning opportunities within the specific social settings of the home and of the school. He suggested that it was the congruity between the learning experiences in these two different social spheres of the child that created links between home and school learning and eased the process of transition between home and school.

When parents and teachers work together to help children learn then the teacher might be provided with a picture of the child in the home context that could enlighten how he or she reacts to the child in the classroom. The learning contexts of home and school could be brought closer together. This creation of greater congruity between the child's home and school literacy experiences might be especially important when the family social context is very different from that of the school.

It appears from research in Britain by Marsh (2003) that parents try to ease the transition between home and school by adopting school-like literacy activities into their home



literacy practices. Marsh found that families of three and four year old children, who attended a nursery, tended to adopt the practices of the nursery into home life. The families, whose children attended the nursery, were asked to complete a literacy diary in which they documented and noted the range of texts read and written by the children over a four-week period. The diaries were then analyzed to determine the range of literacy activities and types of books the children and parents used in the home. Each of the literacy activities reported by the parents was placed into one of four contexts: personal; home; community; and environment. The nursery teacher was then asked to underline those home activities that she felt were reflected in the nursery curriculum. Results from this research indicated that the children's personal literacy practices were not reflected in the nursery curriculum. Even when it appeared that the nursery and the home were engaging in the same reading activity, such as book reading, there were important differences between the practices of the home and those of the nursery. The reading books in the home were concerned with popular television programs, Disney stories and alphabet books, and had been purchased in supermarkets and other non-specialist stores. The reading books that were used in the nursery were very different. The books in the nursery consisted of picture books, or storybooks from particular genres, and had been chosen by the nursery staff rather than the children themselves. Interviews with nursery staff and parents showed that the literacy practices of the nursery school were more likely to be adopted in the home than the home practices were likely to be adopted in the nursery.

Marsh (2003) argued for the use of a wider definition of literacy in nurseries and schools, one that reflected the variety of children's literacy practices at home. The parents in this study tried to help their children learn to read by bringing the activities of the nursery into their home. This meant that the reading practices of the home were being ignored in favor of the more school-like practices of the nursery, and children's reading experiences were being diminished as a result.

Early and Gunderson (1993) agree that children's school-like experience with reading eases transition into school, but explain this may be achieved at some cost to families' reading practices. The researchers found that in Canada children who had extensive book reading experiences before they entered school arrived at school with an orientation to literacy and literacy activities that teachers preferred. Children who had been exposed to book reading in the home were knowledgeable about the conventions of print and had been socialized into middle class language patterns and classroom interaction patterns. Early and Gunderson found that the emphasis, by parents, on this type of preparedness for literacy learning was so strong, that lack of preschool experiences with books was seen as a major indicator of poor school performance. This research highlights the difficulties faced by children from those families whose cultural practices may not include reading to young children.

#### **2. 2. 4. Making hidden learning apparent**

It is important that teachers become aware of the literacy skills that young children already possess when they enter school. In a British study of five young children learning

literacy, Minns (1997) found that children, when they entered school, already had a sense of themselves as learners based on their early experiences of literacy. Teachers may not be aware of the literacy experiences these young children have had and may make judgments about a child's literacy ability based on incomplete knowledge. This "hidden learning" may be made more apparent if parents and teachers collaborate around helping young children's literacy development.

When working with children for whom English is a second language, teachers might find it difficult to become aware of their abilities as they could be masked by language differences. Parke, Drury, Kenner and Robertson (2002) looked at the interface of home and school environments for young bilingual children and demonstrated that these children's literacy abilities might not be apparent within the classroom setting. Case studies of three to four-year old children at home, and five to seven year old children attending a school in England, showed how these children integrated their learning of English with their mother tongue. One three year old child, whose first language was a dialect of Punjabi, was silent in her nursery class, but was observed using both her languages while playing at home. It was notable that this child reserved her newly acquired command of English for when she played school with her younger brother, rather than trying to communicate with her teacher. Another child demonstrated how a Gujarati-speaking child, in nursery class, practiced her writing in both Gujarati and English, thus demonstrating first language literacy abilities that might have gone unnoticed if she had been restricted to writing in English. In the third case, young children were asked to retell a story, first in English and then in their own language.

Unsurprisingly, these children demonstrated a capacity to retell the story at a higher level when using their first language than when using English. However, it was apparent to the researchers that by being able to retell the story in both languages, these children had understood the structure and language of the story they were told and could translate it into their own language.

These case studies showed that bilingual children were constantly engaging in both of their languages in a complex learning process of which mainstream educators, teachers and administrators were largely unaware. The researchers suggested that the integration of first language teaching would support these children's learning by helping teachers appreciate the cultural strengths these children brought to the classroom.

Pahl (2002) also looked at how the literacy beliefs and practices in the homes of children in England, practices that take place in a neutral and often fragmented space, may be hidden from teachers and go unrecognized. In an eighteen-month study, she explored the home meaning-making practices of three boys between 5 and 8 years old from single parent homes each with different ethnic backgrounds. All the boys were experiencing difficulties at school. She described how their meaning making took place in highly specific, cultural and social environments, and how many of their learning activities would not be recognized as meaning making at school. Even between families there were differences in how the children's meaning making was recognized: one family displayed the things the children made on the walls, while another family destroyed them. Pahl concluded that meaning making in the home was connected with the space in which

the artifact was produced, and that this space was constantly changing. She also noted that, traditionally, schooled learning is visible whereas much of the meaning making in the home was less visible and therefore not open to be recognized by the school. Pahl suggested that schools may be better able to serve those children from ethnic backgrounds who had difficulties in class by learning more about these less visible ways of meaning making that take place in the home. She also suggested that the reason these children were misbehaving in school might have been because of their frustration at not being recognized as learners.

Pahl (2002) suggested that school learning is more visible than home learning, partly because of the nature of the space in which school learning takes place. When teachers teach in traditional ways this may be the case, but where teachers incorporate literacy learning into social activities rather than presenting it as a separate activity, children's learning becomes less apparent, and therefore less open to be understood by parents. It appeared from this study that both parents and teachers may be unaware of some the literacy experiences of the children, a situation that might be altered when parents and teachers collaborate.

#### **2. 2. 5. To understand the roles parents and teachers play in helping children learn**

Parents and teachers have different roles to play in helping children develop literacy. These roles are conditioned by the differences in the context of learning, and by the parents and teachers understanding of their role.

In England, Hannon (1998) contrasted the home and school learning environments of children and suggested that the differences in the contexts of learning lead to differences in the way children learn. He described the home learning contexts as one where learning took place in an unstructured way with no formal progression and where the children's opportunities for learning depended on the awareness and expectations of their parents. He suggested that this learning environment provided children with many benefits: it is spontaneous; culturally based; unrestricted in terms of time and space; and related to the specific needs of the child within the family culture. Hannon recognized that a child's learning was shaped in the home environment by the child's interests and needs and that children often appear to participate in learning activities in an effortless and spontaneous way. The home learning context also provided children with other benefits: there was a favorable adult/child ratio; a close relationship with one or two adults who are role models; recognition of a child's achievements that reflect family values and beliefs; possible vertical age groupings with siblings; and the opportunity for the child to be placed in the role of teacher to younger siblings.

Hannon (1995) suggested that, in contrast, learning in school might be seen as structured and formalized, curriculum based and with fewer opportunities for adult interaction than in the home setting. He stated that, theoretically, unlike in the home learning context, every child within a classroom had the same opportunities to learn and is provided with the resources to do so. Hannon explained how, in school, children's learning was shaped by curricular objectives and often seemed to require effort. Children's work might be

formally assessed and time for them to work was scheduled and was often based on contrived problems to be solved. In class, children got little time to converse with adults but were supported by the provision of special resources such as audio-visual and print learning materials. He pointed out that in school children had a discontinuous relationship with adults and were placed in horizontal age groups allowing them fewer opportunities to act as teachers to younger children.

Differences in the beliefs, values and resources teachers and parents bring to young children's learning may also impact how parents and teachers view their roles. Atkins and Bastiani (1988) showed how parents view their own contribution to their children's learning based on their own experiences as a student and that this gave the parents expectations about what the educational system could offer their children. Parents may also bring with them factors relating to their stage in the family cycle, such the number of children, the influence of the extended family members and their employment situations, when considering their roles in helping their children learn. Atkins and Bastiani suggested that teachers in England bring different but related issues to the classroom situation. They suggested that teachers' role is based on their own professional status, past experiences as a student, professional training, and experiences of teaching. The researchers also suggested that the teachers' view of the parental role in the learning process is derived from the ethics and ethos of the school, and past and current contact with parents. Teachers have a philosophy of education that might not be articulated in terms of educational theory, but that provides them with views on how, when and where teaching and learning occurs. Atkins and Bastiani noted that teachers' knowledge of the

community is derived from contact with parents, school and community links, and the reputation that the area may have. They noted that parents assess a school's reputation by combining the expectations they had from their own schooling with information gleaned from friends or older children who have attended the school.

It is hardly surprising that the development of home/school links may prove to be difficult, considering both the differences in home and school learning context and perceptions of teachers and parents. Research by Tett (2000) in Scotland provides some indication about how relationships between parents and teachers with different perceptions about their roles in helping children's literacy development might be fostered. She showed how increasing awareness of different literacy practices could lead to better communication between parents and teachers. Her research was conducted in a school with children from working class families in a city in Scotland. Parents of children in the school were asked to keep daily logs of their home literacy practices and, when the parents met as a group, these were reviewed and discussed. The families learned that literacy was constructed in different contexts and for different purposes by investigating the types of literacy they encountered on a daily basis. As the parents began to understand the number of activities they were involved in, they gained confidence in their own literacy abilities as well as an understanding that school literacy was not the only type of literacy of value. Gaining this self-confidence allowed the parents to discuss their own literacy practices on a more equal basis with the staff of the school, enabling them to become more directly involved with their child's education. Tett reflected that if the literacy of the home and community is unacknowledged by teachers, or even regarded



in terms of “deficit”, then parents find it particularly difficult to share their thoughts and concerns with teachers. She noted that this lack of communication had an impact on the literacy attainment of the whole community, as parents and teachers were unable to share information about the literacy practices of the home and school, and teachers were unable to provide parents with the confidence they need to continue with the literacy practices in the home.

Tett (2000) explained that the present way of thinking about literacy skills is to see them as rungs of a ladder that people have to climb, and that children learn about this ladder at school, thus standardizing literacy accomplishments at the expense of the literacy in the home. She noted that home literacy activities, such as reading newspapers and TV guides, writing notes and shopping lists, differed from the school literacy activities, such as learning letter sounds, reading books and writing essays. She suggested that teachers’ lack of acknowledgement of the literacy practices of the home, and an assumption of the importance of school literacy practices, may lead working class parents to feel alienated from the school and less able to help their children learn. Tett worked with parents and teachers who came from the same cultural and language background. When parents and teachers come from different cultural backgrounds, and different class systems, this feeling of alienation and lack of ability to help children learn might be increased.

#### **2. 2. 6. Parent and teacher collaboration: Summary**

There are important reasons why parents and teachers should collaborate to bring the literacy practices of home and school together. Families contain a wealth of knowledge,

and teachers cannot integrate this into their classroom teaching, unless they understand more about what children know and are experiencing at home. On entering school, children may be exposed to a new way of learning and a new curriculum; if they are to benefit from home and school learning contexts, the transition from home to school requires the integration of the learning practices of the home and the school. For some children, the new situation may not be structured in ways that reflect their learning and their skills may go unnoticed or unappreciated. The home and school learning contexts children encounter are very different, as are the roles taken by teachers and parents in helping children learn. These differences may confuse both children and parents and lead to children's learning environment being less than optimal. When parents and teachers are working in close collaboration, teachers may be made aware of the hidden skills of the children and incorporate them into their classroom activities.

Parent/teacher collaboration is a way of overcoming some of the issues described above. It is a way of ensuring that the home literacy practices of the home and of the school are brought together for the benefit of all children. One way schools encourage this parents/teacher collaboration is by presenting family literacy programs. The next section of the literature review examines the nature of family literacy programs and the assumptions that underlie their design and implementation.

### **2. 3. Family Literacy Programs**

Family literacy programs are presented in many different ways and are based on different philosophies and models. Consequently it is difficult to create one definition of what is

meant by a family literacy program. For instance, two prominent researchers in the field have slightly different approaches to what constitutes a family literacy program. Hannon (2003) suggests that programs are defined by their underlying philosophy of supporting young children's literacy learning, by involving families in ways that acknowledge and make use of family relationships and family practices. Pahl (2002) takes a more pragmatic view when she defines family literacy programs as programs that attempt to combine children's home and school literacy learning contexts through a focus on shared literacy activities with parents and children, often on school sites, but drawing on home-based experiences.

The adoption of Pahl's (2002) definition, that home and school literacy learning practices should be combined, implies that teachers have to take more account of home literacy practices and incorporate them into their classroom practices whereas Hannon's (2003) definition does not address changes in classroom practices. Although there are different approaches to the presentation of family literacy practices and researchers argue about which approach is best, the overriding question is how to ensure that the program design, whatever it is, is effective in achieving the goals set by both teachers and parents.

Cairney (2002a) summarized the different approaches to family literacy programs when he described three broad categories that are used in the design of the programs: those that attempt to strengthen the relationship between home and school literacy learning, by providing parents with ways to help their children learn; intergenerational programs that attempt to bring about change in families, by strengthening the literacy of both adults and

children; and initiatives that attempt to develop more efficient partnerships between home and school in order to support children's literacy development. He stated that there is often confusion between these categories and he argued that many well-intended initiatives are driven by poor assumptions and that definitions of "family", "literacy" and "community" are often limited in scope, not properly evaluated, and fail to achieve any sense of partnership or collaboration between home, school and community.

Although different family literacy programs may have different goals and ways of achieving these goals, their aim is to bring the literacy practices of the home and school closer together in some way for the benefit of young children's literacy development. As we shall see in the next section, schools might try to achieve this by asking the parents to develop home literacy practices that are similar to school literacy practices, or by developing a relationship with parents that lets teachers and parents explore new ways of working together.

Research points to the effectiveness of family literacy programs in providing parents with training in how to support their child's school success. In looking at the effect of a family literacy project on kindergarten students' early literacy skills Jordan, Snow and Porche (2000) described Project EASE in which 248 kindergarten students and their families from four schools in Minnesota, USA, were involved in a five month process of parent training sessions and home-based literacy learning practices. After each of the school-based parent training session the teachers sent home three sets of weekly scripted activities incorporating the principles that were the focus for that month. Data on parent

home literacy practices were obtained from a parent survey and children's language and emergent literacy skills were individually assessed in September, before the start of the program, and in May, at the end of the program. The findings of the research indicated that children's language skills had increased during this program and that this related to the increased amount of book related activities taking place in the homes. These findings were particularly relevant for children who scored low in the pretest. The authors note that this research shows that even in this sample of families from moderate socio-economic backgrounds whose children were attending good schools there is room for parental involvement to improve children's school performance. The study also showed that the parents welcomed invitations to participate in promoting their children's school success, were happy to receive training in how to do this and that parental efforts resulted in increased language skills for their children.

An earlier study (Neumann & Gallagher, 1994) had explored the effects of coaching teenage mothers in ways to enhance existing mother/child patterns of interaction in order to create greater responsivity and thereby support young children's literacy development. The researchers presented six mother and child dyads with materials (Post Office prop box and Grocery Store prop box) that could be used in the home to enhance parent/child interaction around language and literacy learning practices. The mothers were individually coached in ways to support their children's learning and monitored to gauge the effects of the coaching. Results indicated that the mothers increased their interaction with their children in ways that might benefit children's learning and that the mothers' initial lack of involvement with their children was related to their lack of knowledge that

certain activities and behaviors may serve as important precursors to their children's literacy learning and cognitive growth. The researchers considered that an important aspect of the success of this program was the emphasis on coaching the mothers and enhancing their already existing interactions with their children rather than providing them with more formal, detailed instructions about how to help their children learn.

While both these studies point to the effectiveness of family literacy programs in providing parents with ways to help their children's literacy development we need to consider how this support is provided. A later section will examine the different ways family literacy programs are presented.

### **2. 3. 1. Family Literacy**

Before discussing the different models of family literacy programs we need to be sure what is meant by the term "family literacy". Confusion over the absence of one definition of the term has been caused, in part, by the number of fields that are connected to family and literacy: fields such as emergent literacy, adult literacy education, parent-education and support, and children's literacy development. Thomas and Skage (1998) noted that the term family literacy may also be used to denote three separate but related categories of research: interest in the way literacy is used in families; the study of the relationship between literacy use in families and children's academic achievement; and the design, implementation and evaluation of programs to facilitate the literacy development of families. Morrow (2003) stated that family literacy is, by its nature, a complex concept, one that is associated with many different beliefs about the relationship between families

and the development of literacy. Edwards (2004) recognized that confusion about the definition of family literacy has led many literacy specialists to create their own definitions and to conceptualize their own theoretical framework.

In the present study, family literacy is defined as the social and cultural literacy practices and experiences that take place within a family setting, particularly those that encourage the development of literacy skills in young children. Having reached some understanding of what is meant by family literacy we are now able to address what is meant by family literacy programs.

### **2. 3. 2. Overview of different models of family literacy programs**

Family literacy programs may be seen as those instances when parents and program presenters, usually teachers, meet in order to support children's literacy learning by bringing together the literacy practices of the home and school. Most family literacy programs are aimed at supporting parents from low socio-economic and multicultural backgrounds and are influenced by basic beliefs about the nature of the parent/teacher relationship.

A core issue in working with groups of people from different cultures is the nature of the power relationship between the groups and the society in which they live. There are three main metaphors that describe this relationship: the pyramid, or deficit model, where the culture of the mainstream takes priority and other cultures must adapt to it; the melting pot, where the intermingling of different cultures is encouraged in ways that allow for the

development of values and practices that are agreed upon by all; and the quilt, where different cultures keep their own values and beliefs but strive to work together for mutual benefit. Each of these models leads to the design of different types of family literacy program with specific benefits and drawbacks.

The pyramid model, in trying to provide parents and children with the literacy of the mainstream culture, ignores the possibility of other cultures having anything to offer, by presenting a view of literacy based on the beliefs of the program presenter. This approach has been termed a form of cultural imperialism by Street (1991). This model does, however, try to ensure that parents are taught how to provide their children with the means of access to power in the mainstream community.

The melting pot model of family literacy programming accepts that different cultures have different things to offer, and tries to find a happy medium between cultural practices. It does this by finding ways to integrate the different cultural practices.

The quilt model allows cultures to retain their significant strengths, and builds on these strengths without cultures having to change their basic beliefs and practices. In this model, it is assumed that all participants have equal power within the system to live their lives in their own way. Issues of power will be discussed in the next chapter.

Edwards (2003), reviewing the research on family literacy, described three approaches to program design that relate to the models described above, and noted the practical



problems associated with each. The first of the approaches she calls the adaptation approach, and it suggests the metaphor of the pyramid. In this approach to the presentation of family literacy programs, parents are shown how to adapt their home literacy practices to meet the needs of the mainstream culture, specifically the mainstream school culture. Edwards criticized this approach because it values one form of literacy learning over others. The second approach, relating to the metaphor of the quilt, called the incorporation approach. In this approach, teachers and parents try to understand how each defines, values and uses literacy as part of cultural practice. Edwards criticized this incorporation approach on the grounds that teachers do not have the time or necessary skills to learn about different family literacy cultures. In the approach that relates to the metaphor of the melting pot, one that Edwards called the accommodation approach, teachers are sensitized to different cultural norms in order to be able to understand better the children and families. Edwards noted that in the school setting, this approach appears one sided, as it does not provide parents with any resources to help their children learn. This approach might also be seen as being one-sided in that it does not address the need for parents to learn more about the culture of the school.

I would like to suggest, however, a fourth model to the creation and presentation of family literacy programs, one that Edwards (2003) did not appear to consider, a model that involves participants jointly devising strategies to help children learn as a result of learning more about each other's ways of promoting literacy. This model may be called a partnership model. This model differs from the incorporation approach described by Edwards in that the partnership model addresses power issues between parents and

teachers in a different way. Li (2006) refers to a pedagogy of cultural reciprocity where different cultural patterns are reconfigured and acquired by both teachers and parents in ways that enable changes to take place in parent/school relations. In order to achieve this parents and teachers need to reflect on their own cultural beliefs and pedagogical traditions in ways that allow them to learn from each other's knowledge.

I suggest that the incorporation approach to family literacy, where teachers are helped to understand the cultural values and practices of the parents, does not provide a sufficient structure for parents and teachers to work together effectively. This model allows teachers to retain power, and as teachers are in control of setting the agenda for the programs, the model prevents teachers and parents developing the mutual respect and trust that are needed if they are to work together for children's benefit.

The next section discusses the development of these models and their strengths and weaknesses. Examples of family literacy programs based on each of the models are presented, including ways these programs have been modified to overcome some of their weaknesses.

### **2. 3. 3. The adaptation approach to the design of family literacy programs**

This traditional model for family literacy programs is based on research into why some children fail in the school system. This research appeared to show that school achievement was higher for children whose parents had more education and more books in the home, and that parents with poor literacy skills could neither support their

children's literacy learning nor pass on positive attitudes about schooling and the importance of learning to read and write. This research, therefore, implied a direct link between family poverty and low literacy levels in children.

However, in recent years this research has been questioned. Purcell-Gates (1993) showed that most of the earlier research had confused co-relational and causal results, and Auerbach (1989) cited research that refutes, or questions, the assumptions behind the family literacy programs of the time. Despite the adaptation approach to family literacy programs being brought into question by the work of Purcell-Gates and Auerbach, many school-based family literacy programs are still based on these assumptions.

One of the main proponents of this approach is that of National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL). Strickland (1996) described three issues that were of concern to the NCFL and on which they based their design of family literacy programs. These issues were: the low level of literacy skills possessed by a large percentage of the adult population; the growing number of children living in impoverished, disadvantaged homes and failing at school; and the rapid increase in the level of literacy required for employment. Family literacy programs based on these concerns are designed to include a four-component model to serve families:

- adult education, which may include basic education such as life skills, workplace skills, and ESL instruction;
- children's education, which may include instruction for preschool aged children, elementary school-aged children, and/or infants and toddlers;

- parent and child together time (PACT), centered on interactive parent-child literacy activities that strengthen the learning relationship between parent and child and help parents become more empowered in their roles as their children's primary teacher;
- parent time, when parents are provided with information about the literacy development of their children and an opportunity to discuss their children's development as well as other concerns.

Hannon (2000) described this approach to family literacy programs as 'restricted' because it is based on assumptions that families are in need of preventative measures and that it defines family literacy as targeting at-risk parents and children with intensive, frequent and long term educational services. This deficit model of families and family literacy implies that it is only those families deemed to be at risk that will benefit from intervention of some kind. Within this deficit view are the dual approaches of prevention and intervention. Prevention implies the need to educate parents so that they will have the skills to provide for their children; intervention implies the need to alter or add to the skills the parents already possess in ways that help them prepare their children for school life. While these lead to different types of programs, both approaches assume that there is a preferred style of literacy and literacy learning.

Auerbach (1995a), analyzing the assumptions behind many of the family literacy programs of the time, stated that most of the programs were set up to help teachers in the performance of their jobs, rather than helping families support children. She noted that

the assumptions behind many school-based family literacy programs tend to blame marginalized parents for their own marginalization. These assumptions are that:

- the homes of the children from low income and minority families are literacy impoverished;
- the 'natural' direction of literacy learning is from parent to child;
- certain ways of using literacy in the home better prepare students for success in school;
- there is a direct correlation between home factors and school achievement;
- the social problems of families, such as health problems and work factors, put children at risk.

Auerbach (1995a) noted that these assumptions result in program practices that are aimed at changing family beliefs and attitudes related to literacy, and that they often take the approach of trying to teach parents new skills. As she pointed out, parents may not consider these skills as being part of their role in helping children learn, as the programs may base suggestions for home literacy activities on materials that do not value the culture of the family. In trying to change the attitudes and beliefs held by families, programs based on this restricted model are implicitly stating that there is a better set of beliefs and values that the parents need to adopt in order to support their children's learning.

Two examples of the adaptation approach to parent/teacher relationships in family literacy programs highlight how within the adaptation approach there can be differences

in how parents and teachers can co-operate, resulting in different rates of participation by parents. Thus one of the examples may be considered to be more successful than the other.

The Promising Readers Program (Brenner, Jayroe, & Boutwell, 2003) took place in a school serving mainly children of poor, unemployed, African-American or biracial families, and was aimed at supporting the literacy development of young children deemed to be at risk for learning. Children from grades 1-3, who had been recognized by the school as having reading difficulties, were given authentic reading and writing experiences over a four-week period during the summer and in after-school tutorial programs. Seventy-five children attended the four-week summer program and fifty children were served by the 80-minute, after school program that took place three days a week. The children engaged in a variety of small group literacy activities that included learning specific skills and strategies, as well as one to one reading, with a partner or adult. Lessons were based on themes such as baseball, insects, playground design and fundraising. Family members were invited to attend and take part in the sessions.

An evaluation of the program showed that while many family members were learning new literacy practices and becoming more comfortable in the school community, the organizers of the program struggled to achieve the true collaboration they envisioned when the program was developed. They believed that some of the challenges they faced stemmed from unspecified cultural differences between family members and the directors of the course. Several mothers were paid for attending the programs in order to defray

the costs of getting children to the program; however, many of them did not return after a the first few visits to the program, especially the young and single mothers, those the program most wanted to attract. Other mothers attended on an irregular basis, causing difficulties for the smooth running of the program.

The authors reported that, as designers of the program, they struggled to find ways to share ownership and responsibility with family members, even when they engaged in practices that made them uncomfortable. One is left to wonder at how the parents struggled with the aspects of the program that they found uncomfortable. It is interesting that even though the parents were paid to attend the programs, this motivation was not enough to ensure their continued attendance. It may be that the parents felt that this emphasis on payment did not fit with their motivation for attending the program. This program illustrates problematic aspects of an approach to family literacy that tries to change parental practices and attitudes. A description of another program with the same approach, illustrates how these issues may be overcome.

The Canadian Communication Framework (Fowler & Hook, 2005) is a program that provides parents with skills to enhance the interaction, language and thinking of their children. The program was designed in response to awareness that parents from multicultural backgrounds interact and develop language skills within the home environment in ways that may not prepare children for the language of the classroom. The program consists of ten to fifteen two-hour program sessions in which parents of preschool aged children are encouraged to try a different way of interacting with their

children. Each session is split into greeting time where up to 12 parents and two facilitators greet each other, and links between sessions are made by the sharing of photographs of activities from the last session to add to parents' personal scrapbooks of their participation in the program. Parents and children then participate in circle time when they sing songs, tell stories and recite poems. The facilitators ensure that parents are shown how these activities help children learn. Children then go to a free playgroup while parents are involved in direct modeling of strategies and discussion about their use. Parents then explore these skills with their children while the facilitators move around the groups supporting these activities. Sessions end with the children being provided with a snack while facilitators encourage interaction as required.

The focus of the program is the development of specific skills that parents can use to facilitate their children's learning. Facilitator knowledge is balanced with family perspectives and practices through interactive discussions, in ways that respect the values and beliefs of the parents. While the design of this program is based on Edwards' (2003) adaptation model, it includes elements of power sharing. The program designers stressed that they wanted to provide parents with options about how to use language with their children and that they did not want to negate the way parents and children already interacted using language, but to offer parents additional ways to interact with their children. The respect the facilitators showed to the work that parents are already doing with their children, and the way they ensured that they helped parents understand how new activities can help their children learn, contributed to the success of this program as shown by the low drop-out rate.



The adaptation approach to the design of family literacy programs has a lot to offer those parents who are unaware of how the education system works, and who would like to know more about how to help their children integrate into the mainstream schooling. However, it may lead to a school-to-home transmission of information model where the values, beliefs and practices of the teachers in the school are imposed on the parents, and where the literacy practices of the school are seen as being more effective and important than those of the home. This message can be implicitly conveyed by teachers' relationship to parents. The two examples illustrate important differences in approach. To impose different literacy practices on parents in ways that imply they are deficient in some way, does not lead to success. What is required is a way of respecting parental beliefs and values while at the same time introducing different ways of helping children learn.

Ogbu (1978) addressed this issue when he stated that when learners see new learning as a threat to their identity, they are unwilling to accept it. but when learning is additive, and not demanding a change in how they do things, or when it provides an alternate way of learning that can be incorporated into their lives, learners are open to accepting it. When the new learning is seen as threatening identity by changing well-established ways of being, learners are less inclined to accept it. Therefore the success of programs that use this adaptation approach depends on the respect teachers demonstrate for the literacy practices already in use in the home. In order to be effective, any additional practices presented to parents to use at home must be additive rather than threatening.

#### **2. 3. 4. The incorporation model of family literacy programs**

Family literacy programs based on the incorporation model reflect the “melting pot” approach to integration. This model assumes that increased awareness of different cultural practices and beliefs allows parents and teachers to integrate them into their literacy learning practices in ways that support children’s learning. In this model teachers try to find out more about the home literacy practices of parents and children in order to incorporate them into the practices of the classroom and to help parents extend their home based literacy learning practices

Pahl and Kelly (2005) provide an example of this program model. They described family literacy as a “third space” between home and school where the discourses of both home and school are recognized and valued. Pahl and Kelly focused on the way in which home and school discourses surfaced within text making in family literacy programs. The authors described two family literacy programs in which family literacy classrooms are seen as offering a threshold space, where parents can enter the school on different terms, and children can re-enter their parents’ domain within a school setting. This space allowed the two very different discourses of the home and school to mingle. In this way a “third space” is created which lies between home and school and where both discourses are valued.

The authors presented case studies of two family literacy programs in England. In one a “treasure box” is used in which artifacts from home are placed and become playthings for the children of the parents in the project, crossing the borders between everyday lives and

learning through play. Parents were given cameras and asked to record their children's learning and present this in a Power Point presentation. In this way, the CD-ROM became a conduit between the home and the school.

The other family literacy program involved bilingual families making books that included family trees, letters to organize library and other visits, instructions on how to follow recipes, and how to make games and artifacts for children. This emphasis on the use of books to promote literacy learning encouraged parents to translate children's storybooks so that they could be used at home. Quality time spent together with parents and children allowed teachers and parents to talk, share, play, read and write, listen and laugh together, and had a positive effect on the parent/teacher relationship. Pahl and Kelly (2005) suggested that family literacy classes are sites where cultural experiences from home and school may be recognized and suggested ways in which schools can facilitate the creation of this third space. They proposed that artifacts such as CD-ROMs and backpacks providing information about home and school practices can be exchanged, and that schools might set aside rooms to facilitate the setting up of family literacy programs.

This acknowledgement of a third space in which home and school literacies can intermingle, and where parents and teachers can learn from each other, requires a large commitment of time and resources from school staff, as the school has to provide physical space for meetings to take place and someone to promote and supervise this space. My experience has shown that, while many schools may be able to designate a spare room as a parent room, it is difficult for schools to be able to provide staff to

support and encourage parent activities in the room, something that is necessary to ensure ongoing parental participation.

This model of family literacy seems to ignore the need for parents to understand more about how literacy is taught in schools, by over emphasizing home literacy practices. In multicultural settings it might be difficult to incorporate the wide range of family literacy practices that might be reflected in the home life of the children. This model, while valuing the cultural practices of the home, seems to discount issues of power that might influence how and why parents become involved in family literacy programs. Parents participating in these programs were bilingual, allowing them access to the language of the program leaders. However, this approach does point to what can be achieved given resources of time, space and outside support.

#### **2. 3. 5. The partnership model of family literacy programs**

Hannon (2000) described the partnership approach to family literacy as a broad view of family literacy, since it recognizes that all individual literacy learners are members of families who affect, and are affected by, the individual's learning. He suggested that this partnership approach recognizes families as a source of wealth, and allows this wealth to be utilized. The partnership approach to family literacy programs respects the cultural values and practices that exist in families, and builds upon the strengths parents and children bring to the school. He pointed out that family literacy programs that take this approach strive for partnership, inclusion and knowledge seeking, rather than being directive and based on inequalities in expertise and power.

An early example of a family literacy program that strives for partnership with parents is "Project Flame" ([www.uic.edu/educ/flame](http://www.uic.edu/educ/flame)), a family literacy program established to help Latino parents in Chicago enhance the home literacy environments of children aged three to eight. Parents and children who participated in this project attended a series of six monthly workshops, meetings, and other activities at local schools. These were designed to encourage parents to be literacy models to their children and to provide reading and writing opportunities at home. The meetings also aimed to improve home-school relationships, and to take advantage of community resources. In order for parents to become models in literacy learning for their children, the program also offered English as a second language classes twice a week for parents, using a participatory approach to language learning.

This program was successful in supporting both the parents' role in helping their children learn and in developing the parents' ability to work with the school system. During their time in the program, parents became involved in school organization and at the end of a two-year period, were trained to be leaders in the program. After three years, funding for the project was removed and parents ran the program themselves.

Other models of family literacy programs that recognize the families as sources of wealth and go some way to creating a relationship of partnership are the Talk to a Literacy Learner (TTALL) program started by Cairney in Australia (Cairney, 1996), and the

Parents as Literacy Supporter (PALS) program, designed by Anderson and Morrison in Canada (<http://www.lerc.educ.ubc.ca/fac/anderson/pals/>).

The TTALL program is a parent education program designed to provide parents and their children with access to the literacy of schooling by developing more effective relationships between schools and their communities. The program has four goals:

- to provide parents with strategies and knowledge to enable them to more effectively support their children in school learning;
- to lead to improvements in children's attitudes toward literacy and a range of literacy practices and to improve relationships between parents and children;
- to improve the relationships between parents and schools or preschools;
- to increase mutual understanding between all participants in schooling.

The program consists of a mixture of short lectures, workshops, demonstrations and apprentice teaching sessions. All sessions are learner centered, and responsive to the needs and questions of the participants. Parents are recruited into the program by a mix of notices sent from the school and media publicity, and are invited to an initial meeting where the aims of the program are explained and details about parent availability are taken.

An evaluation of the program based on responses of 25 parents and 34 children showed that a majority of the parents agreed that the program had a positive impact on how they interacted with their children, and that it gave parents a better understanding of the school

and confidence in their abilities. While the TTALL program is a structured program, its format and philosophy permit adaptations to be made to suit the needs of families and their children. As such, it is an attempt to provide a vehicle for the development of partnerships with parents.

The PALS program is designed for three to five year olds and their parents and/or other caregivers. The program consists of 10 to 15 two-hour sessions held about every two weeks commencing in October and ending in May. These sessions typically include topics such as early literacy and mathematics development, understanding how computers may be used to aid learning, and how parents may enhance home literacy practice. Sessions begin with families, facilitators and teachers sharing a meal together, and continue with the facilitators and parents spending about one-half hour discussing the topic of the session whilst their children go to their classrooms. Parents, children and teachers then spend about an hour at a number of literacy and learning centers, each containing a different activity reflecting the topic of the day. Sessions conclude with parents and facilitators discussing what they have observed about the children's learning, and discussion of the possibilities for expanding that learning in the homes and communities of the families concerned. On leaving, the parents are presented with a book or other materials to use at home with their children. About one third of the sessions do not have a set agenda so that any issues identified by parents can be addressed. The program takes great care to honor and value the activities that parents already do with their children and no attempt is made to make the parents respond in prescribed ways.

Parents are encouraged to share their own literacy experiences in and out of school (Anderson, Morrison, & Manji, 2005).

Research results showed that parents respond well to this program. The responses of 137 parents, as reported in anonymous, written reports, showed that they had an enhanced awareness of what happened in their children's classrooms, and that this led to an increased rapport and respect for the work done by teachers. The parents indicated that they had developed an appreciation for the emergent nature of literacy learning, and saw the value of play in children's learning, and the importance of pre-school learning. Results showed that the time parents spent with their children in the classroom had afforded them opportunities to work with their children on an individual basis, and created a bond between parent and child that affected how they related in the home context. An important aspect of the program was its capacity to help parents develop confidence in their own abilities to achieve leadership positions within the school. Parents were able to create social networks that allowed them to share child-caring and other challenges, as well as learning from each other. Home/ school communication improved as teachers and families got to know and trust each other and worked towards counteracting the tendency on the part of schools to be concerned only with disseminating information to families.

Parent responses, however, showed some concern with some aspects of the program. The parents did not fully accept the idea of using environmental print or wordless books as means of developing children's literacy skills, and some wanted more focus on specific



reading skills and indications of where children “should be” according to age or grades level.

The findings from this research point both to the success of the program, and a need for a common basis of understanding between parents and teachers about literacy and literacy learning. The parents and teachers were very happy with the program, and the program appears to have increased the amount of common understanding that existed between the teachers and the parent. The concerns of the parents seemed to reflect their lack of awareness of how the teachers were helping their children learn, and their lack of trust that what the teachers were doing would achieve the literacy learning they wanted for their children.

The success of this program is based on the respect and understanding given to parents as they seek to find ways to help their children learn. Parents are given the opportunity to learn the information they need in order to engage in a relationship of partnership with teachers. What parents do to help their children learn is recognized and valued, and families are seen as funds of knowledge. While the program is structured, there is space within it to allow for the parents’ needs to be met and for them to design the content of the program.

The success of programs based on a model of partnership require teachers to share power with parents and this can require a change in their attitude to parents. Bastiani (1993) described the changes that are needed in professional attitudes in order to begin to create

a relationship of partnership between parents and teachers. He described three areas in which these changes have to occur.

The first is a change from seeing parents as a problem, taking up time and energy that teachers could spend working with children, to an attitude that schools cannot survive without the active involvement and support of parents and that teachers and parents both have key roles to play in the shared enterprise of helping children learn. The second shift in attitude requires educators to move from thinking of the development of home/school relations as being peripheral to the main business of the school, to one that sees the programs as being at the heart of children's educational progress in general. The third shift in attitude relates to the complexity of the nature of home/school relationships.

Bastiani advocated training teachers in ways of working with parents, and the development of a whole school approach to this issue, rather than on-the-job learning by teachers.

#### **2. 3. 6. Family literacy programs: Summary**

Family literacy programs are designed to increase children's literacy learning by bringing the home literacy practices, those actions and experiences that are part family life and serve to support a young child's literacy development, closer to the literacy practices of the school. Each model is based on underlying beliefs and values that determine the structure of the program.

The strengths and weaknesses of the three main approaches to the design of family literacy programs have been pointed out and have led to some understanding of how a fourth approach, one that avoids some of the problems inherent in the other approaches, might be developed.

#### **2. 4. Chapter summary**

This chapter highlighted the need for parents and teachers to collaborate in supporting young children's literacy learning, and presented an overview of ways schools are trying to achieve this through the provision of family literacy programs. Whatever approach is taken to the design and delivery of family literacy programs it is apparent that their effectiveness relies on the amount and quality of the communication that takes place between the participants.

The next chapter will explore this issue and suggest why parents and teachers may hold different beliefs and expectations about their role in helping children develop literacy.

### **CHAPTER 3: ISSUES WITH COMMON UNDERSTANDING**

In this chapter the literature that demonstrates the need for common understanding as a prerequisite to effective communication is presented and the consequences of the lack of common understanding discussed. The second part of the chapter explores the range of beliefs that parents and teachers may have about issues pertaining to family literacy programs in schools. The literature suggests that parents and teachers hold different beliefs about both concepts of literacy and literacy development, and about the families' role in helping children learn. Furthermore, culturally held beliefs and practices and relationships of power between teachers and parents may lead to differences in understanding about the parental roles and responsibilities in helping children learn. The chapter ends by acknowledging the difficulty of developing shared understanding when the beliefs and practices of parents and teachers differ.

#### **3. 1. Intersubjectivity**

Chapter 2 presented five reasons why parents and teachers need to communicate about how young children learn, and how parents can help children learn, and illustrated that parents and teachers need to share the kind of information and knowledge that will allow children to benefit from both the home and school learning contexts. In order for this sharing of knowledge and ideas to take place, parents and teachers need a common understanding of the issues being communicated. This common understanding has been termed intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectivity is a joint understanding or view of the world that allows for the exchange of ideas between two or more people. Alterman (2005) described intersubjectivity as the organic structure of human cognition. He suggested that when people share a common understanding about the world they create a basis of understanding that enables them to see and act in coordination with one another. If there is no intersubjectivity between people no communication occurs and their social interaction is stilted and unsatisfying.

Sainsbury (1992) had similar views to Alterman's (2005). Sainsbury stated that in order for people to express their concerns and validate their life skills there is a need for some degree of intersubjectivity to exist between them. She stated that only against a background of intersubjective agreement between group participants can other agreements and disagreements take place, and that ignoring the need for intersubjectivity condemns people to complete unintelligibility and negates all forms of shared experience. Sainsbury noted that people cannot agree or disagree about anything without first identifying what it is that they are agreeing or disagreeing about. She suggested that intersubjective agreement is not therefore a matter of choice, a convention that can be observed or not as people wish. It is necessary to the very possibility of sharing experiences and ideas.

Matusov (1996) stated that, traditionally, the term intersubjectivity has been defined as a state of overlapping individual subjectivities or "prolepses". The term prolepsis refers to a communicative action in which the speaker presupposes, or takes for granted,

something that has not yet been discussed at the time of the action. He described how prolepsis might take the form of a speaker's assumption about the listener's background knowledge of the topic, or about a listener's perception of the seriousness of the conversation, and that intersubjectivity is only achieved when participants in a joint activity have similar prolepses. Intersubjectivity between parents and teachers may only be achieved when both parents and teachers share the same assumptions about the often-invisible concepts and understandings that form a background to any discourse.

### **3. 1. 1. Intersubjectivity and parent/teacher understanding**

Intersubjectivity, or commonality of understanding, does not presuppose agreement. However, intersubjectivity is necessary in order for people to understand what is being discussed and experienced in ways that allow issues to be addressed. The frustration teachers and parents feel about the development of home/school relationships, described in the introductory chapter, may therefore stem from parents and teachers having different prolepses, different beliefs or understandings of how parents support young children's literacy development. Any lack of common understanding between parents and teachers may result from their lack of awareness of differences in their prolepses, and this, in turn, may lead to misunderstanding or miscommunication occurring between them.

In looking at how awareness and understanding can be shared, Tilley (1998) in his analysis of social transactions, found that successful social interaction is dependent on the degree to which participants have shared, localized common knowledge and the degree to

which there is “scripting” about the routines and social formulae participants should follow. In terms of the social interactions of the parents and teachers who participate in family literacy programs, this translates into issues of who sets the time and place for the meeting, and whose ideas are presented. Tilley argued that extreme social scripting and little shared knowledge limits learning between participants and contributes to a lack of the shared understanding necessary for the co-construction of understanding.

By applying this analysis to parent/teacher collaboration in family literacy programs, it follows that when there is little shared understanding between parents and teachers and a rigid, teacher directed, approach to the design of programs and transmission of information, there will be little communication or shared knowledge.

Tilley's (1998) perspective on the need for shared knowledge appears to be verified by Serpell (1997) who, when reporting on interview data from teachers and 22 low-income African-American families, found that parents and teachers not only had different perceptions about children and how they learned, but that they were also unaware that there were differences in their perceptions. As a result, there was miscommunication between the parents and the teachers. Serpell noted that it is necessary for parents and teachers to have a shared frame of reference, or common ground, as a basis for creating the common understanding that benefits children's learning, and he suggested that parent and teacher communication might be increased by the identification of shared assumptions. It is notable that Serpell was reporting on a study in which parents and teachers spoke the same language and had similar cultural backgrounds; where there are

differences in language and culture the possibility of miscommunication may be increased.

McNaughton (2001) addressed this issue when he looked at the continuity between children's home and school learning experiences and predicted that, for children from diverse communities, transition between the home and school contexts of learning can be made easier by the development of shared understanding between parents and educators about the nature of educational guidance for children. He suggested that this shared understanding can be achieved by incorporating the expertise developed in one setting into the activities of the second, and that continuity between the two contexts is dependent on the degree to which both sets of activities have properties in common. McNaughton's suggestion, that the learning practices of the home and school need to be integrated, implies that parents and teachers need to have more knowledge about young children's literacy practices at home and school, and how these practices can be incorporated.

The literature appears to suggest that a lack of shared experiences and beliefs contribute to difficulties in the development of the kind of shared understanding that is necessary in order for teachers and parents to work together and learn from one another, and that this lack of shared experience may be more prevalent when parents and teachers come from diverse backgrounds. In the next part of this chapter I look at differences in belief and practices in four areas:

- how children become literate;



- the role of family;
- culturally based beliefs;
- relationships of power.

These are areas that are relevant to the relationship of parents and teachers within family literacy programs as they may lead to difficulties of common understanding between them.

### **3. 2. Beliefs about concepts of literacy and literacy learning**

In recent years there have been some significant changes in the understanding of what it means to be literate and how literacy learning takes place. Parents and teachers may or may not be aware of, or accept, these new understandings and their implications for young children's literacy development and, as a result, there may be differences in their beliefs about how to help children develop these skills. An understanding of the changes that have taken place provides insight into the range of beliefs and values parents and teachers may hold and how they form the basis of literacy practices of the home and school.

Blackledge (2000a) noted that a crucial debate among literacy researchers is whether literacy should be viewed as a set of individual skills or as social practice. It has been my experience in working with teachers that this debate also occurs among teachers, parents and school administrators. Blackledge stated that the beliefs in literacy either as a skill or as cultural practice need not be considered as contradictory, but may be understood to be complimentary, as the development of literacy skills depended on the context in which

they were being used and that they are implicit within the social, political and intellectual forces that constitute society. If, as he implies, literacy develops differently depending on the social context of the learner, it follows that families from diverse cultures may have different concepts of literacy than those from dominant cultures. By looking at what is implied by an understanding of literacy, either as an acquired set of skills, or as cultural practice, it is possible to illustrate the range of beliefs teachers and parents may hold about what constitutes literacy and literacy learning.

### **3. 2. 1. Literacy as a set of individual skills.**

Hannon (2000) pointed out the main characteristics of looking at literacy as a skill. He noted that this approach to literacy is based on a concept of literacy that values skills of reading and writing, and leads to the implication that there is an “it” to be learned, as reading and writing are seen to be processes requiring decoding and encoding symbols in a preset, generally agreed upon way. Street (1991; 1993) called this the autonomous approach to literacy in contrast to the ideological approach that will be discussed later. He described an autonomous view of literacy as one that assumes that literacy is an independent variable that once acquired leads to a rise in cognitive levels by imbuing people with critical, rational and reflective thought. This view implies that once something has been written it becomes separate from the person who wrote it, and therefore, open for objective comparison and criticism rather than interpretation and evaluation.

Lankshear and Knobel (2003) described how, within formal educational settings, there was a long established field of reading that was grounded in psychology and associated with time-honored methods of instruction such as how to decode and encode text. Students were taught to read and write and children and adults who did not achieve a preset level in these skills were designated as illiterate. This autonomous, skill-based concept of literacy is the one that still dominates much of children's early schooling (Porter, 2001; Hull & Schultz, 2002).

Although in most "Western" societies, autonomous literacy does not exclude critical examination of the text, in some cultures this autonomous concept of literacy is the accepted norm. Written texts are considered to present uncontroversial truths and therefore may be thought of as sacred. In such cultures, the text is considered to be complete, not open to questioning or revision, and understanding of the text is measured by how well it can be learned and recited. Children may be expected to learn these texts by rote in order to demonstrate comprehension rather than question the meaning of the text as a whole. For those parents who believe that skills of reading and memorization leads to comprehension, an approach by teachers that stresses interaction with the text will be outside their experience or belief.

### **3. 2. 2. Development of views about literacy.**

The expansion of the belief of literacy as being skill in "reading and writing" to one of literacy as cultural practice started towards the end of the last century and has developed

rapidly during the last few years. Postman (1970) may have been one of the first people in the US to refute the idea of the neutrality of the reading process in schools. He stated that all educational systems proceed from some model of what a human being ought to be like and that any teaching of reading takes a definite political position on how people should behave and what they ought to value.

Lankshear and Knobel (2003) provide three reasons why the focus changed from literacy as a skill to be taught to literacy as something that is acquired through social processes. The first of these was the rise to prominence of the work of Friere & Macedo (1987). Friere's concept of literacy as 'reading the word and reading the world' involved much more than merely decoding and encoding print; learners used developing literacy skills to pursue a better awareness of the world in which they lived and their place within it. For Friere learning to read and write is an integral part of learning to understand how the world worked and how social change could be implemented. The second factor was the literacy crisis resulting from the new postindustrial world of work, creating a need for more workers with new skills. Reading and writing alone were no longer seen as providing workers with the skills they needed in the new economy. The third cause of the shift in terms from reading to literacy came about as a result of the development of a socio-cultural perspective within the study of languages and social science that challenged the established, skill based, psychological approaches to reading and writing.

### **3. 2. 3. Literacy as a social act.**

Street (1991) took the idea of literacy beyond the autonomous view of literacy into the realm of the social when he proposed an ideological model of literacy. He suggested that people do not first learn the basic skills of literacy and then participate in the social use of literacy; instead they become literate by being involved in social situations as they internalize ideas, theories and models about political processes, personhood and identity. He echoed Postman's (1970) views when he suggested that imparting literacy to others involves ideological contests over meaning and power and is not simply a neutral act of giving to people basic skills for them to do what they want with them. He stated that literacy practices embed personhood, who you are and what you believe, and that this leads to the existence of different models of literacy, such as those based on gender or perceived status. This concept of multiple literacies implies that different social groups use different forms of literacy as a result of their social practices and interactions. Street cited, as an example of how different social groups use literacy, the different way language is used when teenagers use the vernacular and lecturers talk to students. I would also add that the use of text messaging by cell phone users is another example of how different social groups use literacy.

Barton and Hamilton (2000) expanded Street's (1991) concept of literacy as embedded in personhood when they presented propositions about literacy as social practice. These propositions included ideas that literacy is best understood as a set of social practices and that there are different literacies associated with different domains of life. They suggested that social institutions, and power relationships, pattern literacy practices that are

embedded in broader social roles and cultural experiences. They viewed literacy as being historically situated and implied that learning practices change and new ones are acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making. The authors presented three aspects of this social theory of literacy: literacy practices, literacy events and the texts used in these practices and events. Literacy practices were defined as the general, cultural ways of utilizing written language, which people draw upon in their daily lives. These practices are part of a person's values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships and, as processes internal to the individual concerned, are not necessarily visible. Literacy events, on the other hand, were defined as the visible aspects of literacy practice; they are the set of actions in which literacy plays a role and they are shaped by literary practice. These literacy events are based on text, or talk about text, and literacy events and practice are dependent on the existence of text and an understanding of what is produced and used.

The invisibility of literacy practices may lead to confusion and misunderstanding between teachers and parents as the literacy events resulting from one person's literacy practice may bear little resemblance to those of someone with a different literacy practice. For example, a parent who is used to children learning text by rote may be confused when being asked to encourage children to use text to question and predict outcomes and may not understand the literacy practices that support this way of using text. This confusion may lead to lack of understanding about how children develop literacy skills in school.

Gee (2001) reinforced the idea that different cultures have different ways of being literate when he described a socio-cultural approach to an understanding of what is meant by literacy. He stated that there really is no such general thing as literacy and that people adopt different ways of using printed words within different socio-cultural practices and that within these practices people are always both creating and seeking meaning. Graffiti on a wall, notes to a colleague, a child's story written in invented spelling, and a physics text, are all examples of literacy within specific socio-cultural contexts and is interlinked with ways of ways of talking, thinking, and believing and is therefore rooted in socially situated identities. Street (2003) described the "dance" that exists when people are simultaneously coordinating their own literacy with those of others or with the images, symbols, objects, tools, technologies, sites and times that inform their literacy. In looking at how young children develop literacy and language, he suggests that children develop literacy by the use of specific socio-cultural practices related to their use of language and print.

Thus, literacy is now being thought of as something that is situated within specific social settings and cultural activities, and this leads to a concept of literacy that allows for a range of different literacy practices, each associated with a specific literacy situation. For example, there is a difference between the literacy that is used in the home and that used in the school, and in the language of the lecture theatre and the language of the street. However, Pahl and Kelly (2005) stated that this idea of situated literacies may be misplaced, and that rather than using a different literacy for each situation, both children

and parents adapt their literacy to different contexts by creating a third space, one that transcends different situations and that this third space implies new forms of literacy.

An extension of this concept of literacy as being situated in particular cultural and physical settings is the concept of multiliteracies. This concept of literacy assumes that literacy may be associated with different channels or modes of communication and that there are therefore multiple literacies. For example people “read” images in a different way than they read text. This concept of literacy, proposed by the New London Group (1996), goes beyond literacy as defined by written texts to include the icons and signs that are part of everyday life, one in which reading and writing are seen as only one part of what people need to learn in order to be considered literate. As early as 1970, Postman (1970) questioned a schools’ reliance on a print based curriculum in the light of advances in electronic communication, and suggested that schools broaden their curricula to include multi-media literacy, an approach that foreshadowed the multiliteracies movement, thus broadening the definition of literacy beyond the skill of reading print based text. This view of literacy as one that extends beyond the world of oral communication and printed text has lead to the appropriation of terms such as visual literacy, computer literacy and even political literacy.

Street (2000) expressed the inherent danger in this concept of literacy when he stated that the terms may become a metaphor for competence and may even, taken to the extreme, change the concept of language, in the conventional terms of reading and talking, into different semiotic forms of communication. Street was concerned that these multiple



literacies may even be seen as extensions of the autonomous model of literacy in that they may fail to take into account the social practices that go into the use of literacy in context and to emphasize the mode of transmission rather than social practices.

This concept of multi - literacy moves beyond regarding literacy as based in text towards literacy as meaning making practices that may take place in ways that are independent of text. An acceptance of literacy as being multidimensional provides children with new ways to create and transmit meaning. This approach to literacy learning has implications for how teachers report to parents about their child's progress. Those parents used to a more direct form of assessment based on the reporting of a child's reading and writing "skills", may find it difficult to understand how participation in a wide range of meaning making activities helps their child's literacy learning. Thus, teachers and parents may have different concepts of literacy and ideas about children's literacy learning.

#### **3. 2. 4. Early literacy and early literacy development**

Ideas about what constitutes literacy development have changed in parallel to the changes in the concept of literacy. New (2001) described how changes in beliefs about early literacy development resulted from the conflict between interpretations of literacy development as a natural developmental process, or as a formal educational goal. She reiterated how, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, definitions of literacy focused on basic reading and writing competencies, and that children were thought to be developmentally ready to learn these competencies at age 6. This reading readiness approach to early literacy learning and teaching was linked to ideas about children's biological maturity,

and educators and parents were advised to postpone the teaching of reading until the child reached this age.

New (2001) then described how Clay (1966, cited in New) challenged this approach and introduced the term “emergent literacy” to describe the behaviors used by young children before they learned to read and write in the conventional sense. According to New, Clay had observed preschool aged children looking at books in an appropriate fashion and, using the pictures as clues, telling their version of the stories. Whereas the concept of reading readiness suggests that there is a point in time when children are ready to learn to read and write, the concept of emergent literacy suggests that there are continuities in children's literacy development between early literacy behaviors and independent reading skills.

When it became apparent that some children learned to read without any type of formal instruction, the discussion about children's acquisition of literacy shifted from trying to identify the best instructional strategies, to an interest in the processes by which children's literacy skills emerged. This idea of emergent literacy came to be centered on the notion that people develop literacy competencies in relation to each other within a historical and cultural context; literacy is seen as starting at birth, ongoing and influenced by the socio-cultural context.

New (2001) then described how, in Italy, where there is an expectation that children will learn to read and write without specific instruction, the support of young children's social

competencies and multiple symbolic use of language is the basis for literacy education. She noted how the importance placed on language development in Italian preschools supports research that links linguistic competencies with the acquisition of literacy skills and how cultural difference may influence how children's literacy development is viewed. She cited the example of how children in the USA who do not meet a specific reading standard by a certain age are deemed in need of remedial support whereas in other countries, children of the same age would be seen as being still in the process of developing their literacy skills in a normal way.

McNaughton (1995), looking at the development of early literacy for children from diverse social backgrounds, supported the idea that children from different cultures develop literacy skills in different ways. He described the early development of literacy as something that is threaded through child-rearing environments such as the level and type of verbal interaction between children and caregivers, or children's experience with texts and oral storytelling. He stated that differences in environments lead to children developing different systems of learning and expertise in literacy. McNaughton then discussed whether or not oral and written languages are distinct and whether or not this is important in looking at how children develop literacy. McNaughton described how all children acquire the full core grammar of their native language and suggests that oral language has been around long enough to become wired into our genes. However, overlaid on this core grammar is a way of using language that is molded by social context and that is situation specific. He suggested that this is not hard wired but is the product of the history and culture in which a person is immersed.

This issue relates to how people for whom English is a second language exhibit their language skills, as most immigrants learn English within specific social contexts such as places of employment. When people with English as a second language are in a different social setting from the one in which they learned English, such as when talking to teachers, they may be limited in their use and comprehension of English.

McNaughton (1995) suggests that, in terms of early literacy development, the issue is not the varying importance of written and oral language or how children learn to read but rather how children do, or do not, acquire specific social practices and social languages that involve the use of words. These social languages are not necessarily acquired by direct instruction but by socialization accompanied by mediation where required. Children's early literacy learning becomes more about the kind of experiences they have that encourage them to talk, read and write. Literacy learning becomes one aspect of a learning life rather than a particular focus within a curriculum.

The view of literacy as being socio-culturally determined leads Gee (2001) to define literacy learning as a change in how one participates in specific social practices within specific "Discourses", or ways of being. He used the capital letter to distinguish between discourse, meaning an act of communication, and Discourse as a way of being in the world. No longer can literacy learning be seen as a process of learning specific skills without reference to the social and cultural identities that children bring to the learning situation. Gee emphasizes that this view is neither pro or anti skill based literacy learning

but sees such learning and teaching as being situated within different social practices and Discourses. Children are acquiring values, attitudes and many other things at the same time that more specific skills are being taught. Gee states that a child's literacy development can only be understood in terms of their use of words within different social and cultural practices and Discourses. This view of early literacy learning expresses the age-old teacher dictum that you only ever teach "yourself," meaning that whatever is taught is done within a specific set of values and beliefs or personal Discourse. Children are very good at discerning these beliefs, even when they are not made explicit. One wonders if this is the case within parent-teacher relationships in family literacy programs. It may be that the parents discern teachers' hidden assumptions about them, such as assumptions teachers may have about the amount of parent/child interaction that takes place in the homes, or about the parents' ability to provide their children with accepted ways of learning. If so, this would discourage the development of any parent/teacher connections.

Looking at early literacy development as a socio-cultural phenomena implies that it is the quality and number of children's experiences that contribute to literacy learning and seems to put pressure on parents to provide their children with as many experiences as possible. Those families, who might be struggling to fit into a new society and to learn about the new culture that surrounds them, may not be able to provide their children with the same types of experiences as those provided by parents from the predominant culture. Thus, their children will enter school with a different set of literacy experiences from other children in the class. Teachers may not be aware of these experiences and as a

result these children's abilities may not be recognized or accepted within the mainstream school setting. Teachers may think that these children are lacking in life experiences when, in fact, this is not the case.

Snow (1983), drawing on research findings and a case study of a child learning to talk and read, outlined important similarities in the development of language and literacy. She defined literacy as activities associated with print, and language as speaking and listening, and noted that the differences are more of degree than of absolutes. Snow suggested that the acquisition of literacy and language are similar in that they are both complex systems based on communicative actions that take place in interactive social situations. However, she suggested that there might be significant differences in how children acquire language and literacy, in that language appears to occur naturally whereas reading often needs to be taught.

Snow (1983) then suggested that it is the de-contextualized nature of most literacy teaching in schools that requires reading to be taught. This de-contextualized use of literacy prevents children from learning to read as quickly and easily as they appear to learn to use language. She also suggested that it was the need for children to understand the conventions associated with reading that caused children to be slower learning to read than to talk. She stated that the apparent ease with which children learn to use language masks both the amount of pedagogy that has taken place within family interactions and the contextual nature of those interactions. Snow discussed how the differences the conventions used in oral and literacy exchanges might affect how quickly and easily

children learn to talk and to read. She noted how it is more important for a child to learn the conventions of print than the conventions of language, as face-to-face exchanges do not necessarily break down if unconventional forms are used because the speaker's meaning can be questioned and clarified. Thus, though reading and writing require the use of conventional forms from the very start, it is easier for children to develop language because it is used in context and the conventions are less of an impediment to understanding than when reading. Lack of awareness of conventions in reading and writing may lead to issues with spelling. Those children who are more advanced in their understanding of the use of conventions in writing will want to spell words correctly, whereas those children less informed about conventions may be more willing to use unconventional or emergent spelling.

This need to use conventional forms of spelling has implications for parent/teacher relationships as parents often complain about children's use of emergent spelling and apparent lack of spelling ability. Parents, who have an understanding of the conventionality of spelling, may expect their children to be taught the conventions of spelling, whereas teachers may be more involved in helping children develop different ways of expressing their thoughts or using their emerging knowledge of speech-print relationships, rather than concentrating on developing children's spelling ability. This may lead to confusion and miscommunication between parents and teachers. However, the question remains as to why some children have difficulty in learning to read when learning to read is supported by the same sort of interactions as learning to talk? Snow (1983) suggested an answer by differentiating between the regular oral discourse of

families and the more de-contextualized language that may be used in middle class families when recounting family histories or reading stories. She suggested that the activities of middle class parents move language out of the present context used in regular communication into contexts that are similar to the de-contextualized language used in schoolbooks, and that the reason why some children may experience difficulties learning to read is because of their lack of experience with using de-contextualized language. However, the fact that some children, such as those children who learn to read by rote memory, appear to learn to read without being exposed to de-contextualized language, may indicate that children's difficulties in learning to read may be caused by a mismatch between the way reading is taught at school and the way it is experienced in the home environment. Schools may need to be more aware of the literacy practices of the home and incorporate them into the classroom in order to help children who are experiencing problems learning to read.

There has been ongoing discussion in educational spheres about the way bilingual children develop literacy skills. How does a child handle one language in the home and another in school? What effect does this exposure to different languages have on the child's literacy learning? Tabors and Snow (2001) detailed some of the ways young bilingual children in the United States developed early literacy skills and how these related to the use of their first and second language in home and school. She noted that there were multiple pathways available to support young bilingual children's literacy, such as other family members, watching television, participating in community activities and reading comic books and environmental print such as street signs and notices in



stores. Several of these pathways involved support for the child's bilingualism and support for literacy acquisition in both languages, for example watching television channels in different languages. She suggested that educators should encourage parents to maintain their first language in the home especially in ways that develop literacy skills in their children and that bilingualism should be supported in the school setting.

Cummins (2000) went further by suggesting that bilingual children should have the opportunity to participate in their first language in the school setting. He suggests that when their first language is used in school, children's opportunities to learn and to demonstrate what they have learned are increased. While some educators do encourage parents to maintain their first language in the home by emphasizing the use of dual language books and by arranging for after-school programs to support children's first language, there is very little impetus to provide bilingual education for most students, except for French immersion which may not help immigrant children.

Tabors (1997) described the four phases of young children's experience with a second language. Initially, a child may continue to speak in his or her first language in the classroom, as he may not yet realize that a new language is being used in a new setting. Then there is a period when the child becomes nonverbal as he realizes that his language does not work in the new setting. Children then become spectators in preparation for using the new language, initially in a telegraphic and formulaic style that helps them get into the flow of the classroom and begin to sound like members of the group. The next stage occurs when they experiment with using the new language, making many mistakes

as they begin to understand how it works. These stages are cumulative and a child may revert to an earlier phase when encountering difficulties with using or understanding the new language. Children who appear to be in command of the new language in some social situations may not be as sure of their skills in others when a different form of social language is needed. Parents who see their child playing and communicating with other children and assume that they have acquired good language skills in the new language may not understand that when the child is in class, he or she may not have the language proficiency required to benefit from what the teacher is explaining.

In looking at the complexity of beliefs about early literacy development Jalongo, Fennimore and Stamp (2004) highlight four different models for understanding how children develop literacy. In the first model, it is assumed that literacy learning is linear and additive; this model is often used in schools as the basis for teaching children to read and write. A second model is based on Scarborough's (2001) concept of reading development as a combination of five different types of language abilities and three different types of word recognition strategies. These strategies need to be combined in order for children to be able to read. A third model is concerned with the interactions between the child's background and his or her developmental levels of cognitive processing abilities and verbal and linguistic intelligences. The final model relies on an understanding of how the brain works, where researchers have associated different patterns of brain activity with differences in reading ability. Jalongo, Fennimore and Stamp stated that all these perspectives are necessary in order to gain a glimpse of how children develop literacy. They came to the conclusion that it was important to integrate

different ideologies about literacy development, such as the dichotomy between the home and school literacy learning contexts and the varying practices of teachers in different classrooms. They also suggested that the kind and amount of resources available for literacy learning should be considered when helping children learn and concluded there is no single, correct way to lead children to literacy. They described literacy development as engaging in dialogue and forging an identity and suggested that literacy is only useful if it leads to power, the power to influence people and society in ways that make them more compassionate, effective and just.

This is a demanding requirement for literacy learning. It implies that literacy is developed as children begin to have power to understand who they are and what they can achieve in society. It takes the emphasis off learning literacy as an isolated activity and sees literacy learning more in terms of personal expression and communication.

Teachers who adopt an approach that encourages children's self expression will allow children choice over what they learn and how they present this learning and will equate the development of a responsible attitude to learning and a child's confidence in expressing their ideas to increased levels of literacy. Classrooms where children are learning different things in different ways may appear to be chaotic to parents more used to a structured and directed environment. Parents may be not be aware of the learning that is taking place within the seemingly unstructured school setting and this could lead to confusion and misunderstanding between teachers and parents.

### **3. 2. 5. Literacy and literacy learning: Summary**

Few parents will have been exposed to more recent changes in thinking about literacy and thus there is a disparity between the popular and professional understandings of literacy. Also, not all teachers agree with the new ways of thinking about literacy, so there is often a lack of consistency within a school's approach to literacy teaching and learning.

### **3. 3. Family**

The concept of family is central to family literacy and family literacy programs, yet there may be confusion about the meaning of the word. The next section addresses the issues that may contribute to differences in understanding about what constitutes family, and how differences in what constitutes family and family support for children affects children's literacy learning.

#### **3. 3. 1. Changes in family structures**

There have been changes in our understanding of what constitutes a family or a parent that have implications for education. Edwards (2004) noted that many families in the United States no longer resemble the two parent families of the 1950's and 60's, where the father worked to support the mother and their children. There are now many diverse types of relationship that constitute families, including single parents, working mothers, and stay at home fathers, both father and mother working away from home, second marriages where children from different backgrounds are brought together, children moving between the their mother's and father's home, gay and lesbian parents, extended

families where the main child care is provided by a grandparent, and single parents of both sexes. This change in demographics is not limited to the United States. Hallgarten (2000) noted that in the United Kingdom families are becoming smaller and there are more children born outside marriage, which may lead to them growing up with one resident parent. Family structures are becoming more fluid and as a result more children are experiencing changes in family structure. Employment conditions have changed and more mothers are now in paid employment and working longer hours. Hallgarten noted that instances of more flexible patterns of employment and the numbers of children who are growing up in families on low incomes or with no earner have increased significantly.

These changes impact on the context in which home/school relations are formed.

Tutwiler (1998) provided some instances of this change. In an increasing number of families, there is no single, main adult contact between home and school, or the contact may not be the child's parent. Teachers can no longer assume that most children go home to a situation where the parent supports the child's schooling or that the child is able to obtain the help that might be required. They must be aware of increasing material inequalities in the learning resources of children from different families and the effect these inequalities may have on children's education. The relationship between parents and schools may be affected by faulty perceptions schools hold of given groups. Often school expectation of families reflects behaviors, values and capabilities of middle class nuclear families that can often overlook the contributions other families bring to their child's education and, while traditional bonds between white middle class families and schools must be maintained, there is a need to recognize the variety of ways in which

families who do not fit this norm conceive of their roles in the educational lives of their children.

### **3. 3. 2. Families members as sources of literacy support**

Mace (1998) noted, with some degree of irony, how the term “parent” is often used in home/school communication to denote ‘mothers’ and how the responsibility for children’s literacy development is often placed squarely on their shoulders. This view is supported by research that looked at images on family literacy websites in Canada (Anderson, Streelasky, & Anderson, in press). The researchers in this study found that the dominant image on family literacy web sites is that of a mother and child in the home, and that when fathers were depicted it was as part of a nuclear family rather than as independent literacy supporters. The researchers also found that most images depicting the transmission of literacy was that of an adult helping a child. They also found that images of book reading predominated at the expense of written and oral literacy activities and there was little evidence of the role of technology in helping children’s literacy development. When looking at the written texts on the websites, the most frequently cited family literacy activity was reading books to children and the authors state that the texts do not promote the fact that literacy occurs in the informal, unplanned activities that occur as families go about their daily lives. Some of the web sites link family literacy with stronger families and increased wealth generation, claims that have been disputed in the past, and they also stressed that reading to children is a surefire way to help them develop literacy. In contrast to these findings, when children were asked to draw a picture of reading and writing they depicted a variety of activities taking place in a variety of

contexts. The authors concluded that the family literacy websites presented a narrow perspective of family literacy that contrasted with children's images.

Although the websites reviewed in the study above implied that mothers are the main support for children's learning there is research that indicates that other family members also play a significant part in helping children learn. Williams and Gregory (2001), exploring the beliefs and practices of two communities in London's East End, found that when older siblings were playing with their younger brothers and sisters they reflected the values of both in-school and out-of-school literacy practices, and became intermediaries in helping their younger siblings interpret literacy practices of the school. Volk and De Acosta (2004) also demonstrated the importance of sibling support when they documented how Latino, bi-lingual siblings supported each other's literacy learning in ways that complemented the role of the parents. Drury (2004) reported on how Pakistani siblings "playing school" can support each other's language development.

Members of a child's community also have a role to play in children's literacy development. Olmedo (2004) reported how Latina grandmothers from a senior citizen centre provided literacy experiences for fourth graders in a dual language school by telling their stories and sharing their funds of knowledge. Long, Bell and Brown (2004) reported how three Spanish-speaking kindergarten children learned from each other during classroom based literacy activities and Datta (2004) used the term "friendship literacy" to denote the shared literacy experiences of children from different cultures.

The literature indicates that while family members, peers, and communities have significant influence on the literacy development of young children, their contribution may appear to be underrepresented or unacknowledged in programs aimed at encouraging family literacy activities. By seeing mothers as the main support for the child's literacy learning, teachers are discounting the benefits that children may obtain from the contribution other family members.

### **3. 3. 3. Ways families support children's literacy development.**

Families support children's literacy learning in different ways. In a study that describes the home literacy practices of families and young schoolchildren, Cairney and Ruge (1997) found four distinct purposes for literacy in the homes and classrooms of the students: literacy for establishing and maintaining relationships; for accessing or displaying information; for skill development; and for pleasure and self-expression. They noted how a newsletter, intended as a means of communication between the home and school, was used as oral reading practice in one home indicating that parents supported children's literacy development in ways that depended on their perceived needs. The ways in which parents supported their children's literacy development included: modeling literacy activities in ways that denoted the value of literacy; stimulating children to read in various ways; communicating their expectations concerning their children's achievement and interest; providing reading materials; reading with children; and providing opportunities for verbal interaction (Saracho, 2002).



Research on how different families supports their children's literacy learning shows similarities and differences between families. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) studied the family literacy practices of six, white, middle class families in New York over a period of three years and found that the way parents mediated literacy experiences for children varied both across and within families. The literacy experiences she saw within families were rich and varied and included the reading and writing necessary for running a household, reading for information and pleasure, communicating with others, and establishing social connections. These literacy experiences surrounded all the members of the family and were woven into daily activities in a seamless way. Taylor (1997) extended this work to include the family literacy practices of black families living in urban poverty. They described seeing literacy practices in 22 categories that included reading to gain information; reading to build relationships; news-related reading; recreational reading; writing notes and lists; reading forms, puzzles and crosswords; and work related writing. Their work showed that home literacy practices were rich and diverse and based on daily experience within different socio-economic groups.

However, later research by Sonnenschein (2002) in America, cast doubt on these findings. She took the approach that a key element in helping young children learn to read is engaging the child's interest, and that this may be achieved by fostering a sense that literacy is a source of pleasure. In her review of research into parental beliefs about the importance of education, how children learn, and their involvement in their child's schooling, she pointed to differences between the beliefs and expectations of middle class and low income groups of parents in several areas, the most significant being that parents

from low income groups are more likely than those from middle income groups to endorse an approach to learning that stresses direct skill inculcation.

There is evidence to suggest that differences in how families perceive early literacy development may relate to the parents' level of literacy. Research into how parents perceive preschooler's emergent literacy (Spiegel, Fitzgerald & Cunningham, 1993) showed that parents with low levels of literacy had different perceptions about children's literacy learning than those parents with high levels of literacy skill. (The researchers collected data from 108 parents whose children were entering kindergarten in two schools. However, it is not clear from the report of the research how levels of literacy skill were assessed). Parents with estimated low levels of literacy ranked literacy materials and literacy events as important, saw their role as that of providing instructionally oriented or special materials such as flash cards and alphabet blocks, and gave more importance to child-centered events than to parental role modeling. Parents with estimated high-level literacy skills took a more naturalistic approach to their children's literacy development and rejected skill or instructionally oriented activities. Despite these different approaches to helping their children's literacy development, both sets of parents placed more value on children developing skills associated with reading rather than writing.

Anderson (1994) delved further into this issue when he suggested that teachers should use caution when attempting to categorize parents' perception of literacy or their perception of the parents' level of education, as he found that some highly literate parents

had quite traditional perceptions of how to support children's literacy development. He conducted a study in which twenty-five parents, whose three and four year old children attended a Child Study Center at a Canadian university, were asked about their perceptions of emergent literacy. Anderson found inconsistencies within a group of parents from similar backgrounds. The parents in the study, who were from middle class and upper-middle class socio-economic groups, were highly educated and represented a number of ethnic groups. Anderson used his "Parents' Beliefs About Literacy Learning" questionnaire in which parents are asked 33 questions relating to aspects of young children learning to read and write. Results showed that approximately 88% of the parents' responses were consistent with an emergent literacy perspective of children's literacy development. However, some parents accepted certain features of emergent literacy more than others, and they appeared less inclined to accept traditional skill orientated reading materials. Although parents appeared to accept an emergent perspective about children's writing, they expressed some concern over children's use of invented spelling and would try to correct children's spelling on occasion, even though they knew it was not consistent with an emergent writing approach.

In America, Lareau and Shumar (1996) noted that differences in parents' social class, such as educational skills, occupational flexibility, economic resources, and social networks, lead to different perspectives about how to help children. They provided examples of parent/educator interactions that showed lack of mutual understanding between teachers and parents of learning issues and of the environment that fostered it. This was especially true in discussions about homework. Lareau and Shumar noted that

homework often created tensions within middle-class families, tensions that were not present in working class and lower class families. It appeared that, although middle class parents are often involved in helping their children with homework, working class parents do not think they have the ability to provide the help their children require and as a result the children go elsewhere for help. The authors suggested that most educators presume that family/school relationships are characterized by consensus and harmony but this research suggests that this may not necessarily be the case.

#### **3. 3. 4. Family: Summary**

Families help children develop literacy in a variety of ways depending on their background, experiences and beliefs. Support comes from many different family members, often in ways that may not be recognized by the school. However, parents often have different perceptions of their roles in family literacy development, both amongst themselves and with the teachers. By understanding the variety of ways children are supported within families, teachers may be better able to support the literacy practices of the home.

#### **3. 4. Culture**

Culture is defined as a people's way of life, a framework within which members of a population see the world around them, interpret events in that world, behave according to acceptable standards and react to their perceived reality. It consists, among other things, of customary ways of behaving, the assumptions that underlie these behaviors, and the patterned way that people relate to one another (Ogbu, 1995a). Ogbu states that people

behave, think and feel in the different cultural worlds to which they belong and that different cultures have different assumptions that lead to different behaviors.

### **3. 4. 1. Culture and learning**

Cultural differences have implications for literacy teaching and learning, as cultural identity mediates the process of becoming literate and of the literacy events that a person engages in (Ferdman, 1990). In collectivist cultures, where the needs of the group tend to be given preference over the needs of individuals, literacy learning and teaching have a strong emphasis on the direct transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student, whereas in more individualistic cultures, where the individual is viewed as a learner in his or her own right, a more explorative and constructivist approach to teaching and learning tends to be used (David, Raban, & Ure, 2000).

This difference of approach between collectivist and individualistic cultures is supported by the findings of a study of early childhood educators from four countries (David, Goouch & Jago, 2001). In England and Australia, children's play was seen as a basis of early learning with more formal skill based activities being seen as part of later school life. Teachers in both countries used practices that had a child-centered philosophy. However, in France and Singapore the authors stated that early learning activities were more teacher led and often based on workbooks and direct skills practice. The researchers noted the differences between the individualistic cultures of Australia and England, where children's learning environment enhances personal achievement and the more "collectivist cultures" of France and Singapore where learning is by imitation and

rote learning and play is seen as just “fun”. This difference in approach is reflected in the relationship between adult and child. In individualistic cultures, adult-child relations are based on mutual respect whereas in the collectivist cultures, relations are based on hierarchy and respect for the teacher’s role. (It is not clear from the report of the research what lead the authors to designate France as a “collectivist” country. I have friends in France who might disagree with that label, as might people from Singapore. It may be that the authors are inappropriately projecting the structured nature of the way children are taught to the overall culture of the country.)

These two studies however do have implications for understanding the relationships between teachers and parents where parents come from diverse cultural backgrounds. Parents from more collectivist societies, e.g. Vietnam and China, may feel that they have a limited role to play in helping children learn and that it is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that children learn, leading to a parent teacher relationship that emphasizes a separation of roles and limited need for parent/teacher interaction. Parents from more individualistic cultures, such as the USA, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, may see the teacher and parent roles as complimentary, and be more willing to become involved in helping their children learn.

### **3. 4. 2. Culture and learning environment**

Parents from different cultures may also have different understandings about the best environment for children’s learning to take place. In an early study comparing the parents’ perceptions of preferred early childhood literacy programs in Sweden and the

United States (Carlson & Stenmalm-Sjoblom, 1989), it was found that parent perceptions are based on the influences of the macro-society in which they live. In the USA, parents perceived an exciting environment and programs that emphasized conformist, outer-directed activities stimulating children's learning, while parents in Sweden preferred subdued, natural environments with an emphasis on child-centered, inner-directed activities for their children's early learning experiences. In a multicultural setting, parents may have different understandings about how classrooms should be organized to help children learn. For parents who believe that children learn best in an ordered, structured setting, the more loosely organized, exploratory settings of some classrooms may seem chaotic to them and they may be unaware of the learning that is taking place.

A comparison of Chinese and Canadian classrooms (Zheng, 2006) illustrated differences in how teaching and learning takes place in these different classroom environments. Chinese students tend to stay in the same classroom all day and it is the teacher that changes rooms for lessons rather than the western system where students change classrooms between lessons. In Chinese schools, there is only one grade in each class and it is unlikely that there will be any culturally diverse students. All the classrooms look the same with walls decorated by portraits of people who have made significant contributions to human development rather than teacher and student made displays.

Zheng reported that there are different expectations of student behavior as well as differences in the learning environment; students in China are expected to study for many hours a day and Chinese parents play a big role in determining what a student's interests

should be. The work is geared to examination success and students are expected to make notes from course books rather than using prepared handouts. Chinese parents, assuming that the teacher knows best, would never question the level and amount of work given to the students. While Zheng would like to see some changes in the Chinese system of education to reflect the best of Canadian education, she acknowledges that the Chinese education system has a lot to offer and the large population base and limited resources may make these changes difficult.

Research by Li (2006) demonstrates how families that immigrate to Canada from China try to adapt to the more individualistic society in which they find themselves. Li explores the difficulties young children experience trying to adapt to their new educational environment.

### **3. 4. 3. Culture and interaction with text**

As well as differences in understandings about the best environment for learning and how teaching and learning should take place, cultural differences also lead to differences in how text is read and understood. In some cultures, text is taken to represent the truth and to contain an underlying moral. The information in the text is accepted without question and readers are not expected to interact with the text to seek clarification (Edwards & Nwenmely, 2000).

Ran (2000), analyzing the experience of five Chinese mothers reading to their children, found significant differences from the accepted Western concept of reading to children.



The mothers interpreted the request to read to their children as a way of instructing their children, and read from standard textbooks rather than choosing storybooks and reading them for pleasure. While reading the book, they asked children questions to test their understanding of the text and emphasized a close understanding of the text, rather than looking for reader response and enjoyment. The author noted that these were all well educated mothers and it appeared that, in order to help their children, they were replicating their experience of school in China. Although all the mothers adopted this instructional approach to reading with their children, it is important to note that there were significant differences in some of the strategies they used. The proportion of the mothers' utterances that were categorized as questions ranged between 13 and 36 per cent, and those categorized as instructions between 4 and 27 percent.

The approach used by these mothers in helping children learn to read by emphasizing understanding of the text, contrasts with cultures where text is understood as a form of dialogue, where children are encouraged to interact with it by asking questions and relating it to their own experiences and where children are to seek enjoyment in the process of reading. Edwards (2004) noted that teachers often ask parents to read to their children as a means of developing their literacy skills, and in doing so may expect that parents will actively engage children with the text as they do this. She pointed out that this may not, in fact, be the case and that parents may be reading to their children in ways that differ from that expected by the teacher.

#### **3. 4. 4. Culture and literacy learning**

Perceptions about how children learn to read and write also differ across cultures.

Anderson (1995) found some significant differences between Chinese-Canadian, Euro-Canadian and Indo-Canadian groups of parents whose children attended schools in an urban setting. Parents were asked to describe the five most important things they did to help their children learn to read and write. The results were grouped into five themes: participating in activities/events; teaching literacy skills; valuing, demonstrating and encouraging literacy; knowledge development; other responses outside the domain of literacy. Results of the study point to significant differences between the groups, in that the Euro-Canadian (middle-class) and Indo-Canadian (lower class) parents appeared to support social aspects of literacy learning while the Chinese-Canadian (middle class) parents did not. They appeared to support a more didactic approach to literacy learning than the other groups. The Euro-Canadian parents appeared to value encouraging, supporting and valuing literacy more than the other groups. Although the author warns that this was a small-scale study and the results need to be interpreted cautiously, it does indicate that within a diverse society, there is likely to be a wide range of parental perceptions about how children become literate.

An even smaller, in-depth case study of two boys, born on the same day to parents of different ethnic background (English and Bangladeshi) and who attended the same class, compared the difference in parental beliefs and the school interactions of the mothers (Brooker, 2002). She found that there were significant differences in how the mothers prepared the children for school and that these differences impacted on the teacher-child

and teacher-parent relationship. The English mother prepared her son for school by teaching him his letters, instructing him to talk to the teacher and to bring work home. In contrast, the Bangladeshi mother prepared her son by teaching him the Bengali and English alphabets, sharing school books and getting him to copy text using rote learning and memorization. Her son was instructed to sit still at school, say nothing and study hard. These different beliefs and practices translated to different experiences in the classroom where the English boy received high levels of interaction with adults and was frequently involved in construction, math and drawing activities. The Bengali boy demanded and received very little adult interaction and was described as thoughtful and absorbed.

The parents' relationship to the school also differed. The English mother insisted on informing the school about her child and made constant requests of the school about his teaching and learning and kept the class fully informed about home and family life. The Bengali mother was not seen to speak with the staff, made no requests, and offered no information about home life. Towards the end of the study the researcher noted that these two well motivated children, with highly educated family backgrounds, seemed to have been assessed as having unequal potential and set on different educational trajectories. The author accounts for the boys' varying success in importing their home literacy into the classroom by looking at the nature of their social and cultural capital. While both families displayed considerable assets and cultural capital, only one set of assets appeared to be invested in the education system and the home support given to the Bengali boy was invisible to the school staff. While Brooker (2002) suggested that this

problem might be alleviated by better home/school communication, the results indicated that differences in parental perceptions of what constituted learning and parental support might have far reaching effects on children's education.

Unarticulated differences in aims of teaching and learning can lead to different perceptions of schoolwork. In a study of how two mothers from the Caribbean community of Monserrat and their four children perceived English schools, Windrass and Nunes (2003) found that the mothers considered their children's school expected a low standard of work from them. The parents' expected the teachers to teach the curriculum when their children attended school in England and they expected their children to learn what was being taught. They also expected the teachers to find the results of their children's learning through testing what the children had learned. These expectations contrasted with the teachers' approach to teaching and learning. The teachers understood teaching and learning to be interdependent activities in which teachers follow the children's lead, encouraging them and helping them when they have difficulties.

These differences in expectation created problems of communication and understanding between the parents and the teachers. For instance, the parents and the teachers had different understanding of homework tasks. One parent, misunderstanding the pedagogical aims of a worksheet, used it for handwriting practice rather than practicing word spelling. Parents wanted to see the books the children were working on in school so that they could understand what their children were doing in school and did not see the worksheets as providing them with this information in the way teachers did. Parent

evenings were also perceived in different ways. The teachers saw them as a chance to report on children's achievement, in terms of developing independence and individualism, and to present their teaching goals. The parents, on the other hand, were looking for a more interdependent approach to their children's learning. They expected the teacher to set learning goals and to ensure that the children reached these goals. As a result these parents wanted a better understanding of what their children had learned, and how well they had learned it, than they were receiving from the teachers. The authors suggested that the negative perceptions parents and teachers had about each other were the result of the different expectations of how teaching and learning would take place, and that until these different expectations were articulated, misunderstandings would remain.

A study by Gillanders and Jimenez (2004) that examined the home environment of two kindergarten children of Mexican immigrants of low-socio-economic status in the USA who displayed high levels of emergent literacy when compared to their peers, indicated that parents will accept new ways of working with their children in so far as they fit into their existing beliefs about children's learning. By conducting extensive interviews, observing the participants in their home, and accumulating samples of the children's work over a three-week period, the researchers were able to understand the families' beliefs about literacy development and instruction and the literacy practices they engaged in. They found a wide range of both formal and informal literacy practices that were shaped by the parent's own history of literacy learning and that they actively adapted some of the advice given by the school to their own practices. However, this adaptation

took place within the framework of their beliefs and values. For example, when asked to read to their child, the parents integrated this into the children's homework routine and were reluctant to interact with the texts. This study has implications for the strategies parents are shown in family literacy programs. Unless the literacy learning strategies presented in the programs can be related to the beliefs and values that parents hold, they may not be of use to parents, and may even serve to alienate them.

Research by Webster and Feiler (1998) found results that contrasted with earlier work by Teale (1986), that demonstrated the richness of children's home literacy experiences, when they observed the literacy experiences of ten children in two schools serving low-income families. Home literacy learning practices were observed and parents were interviewed about their understanding of children's literacy learning. They found that the most frequent form of home literacy activity involved children practicing reading and writing as discrete, isolated skills rather than it being embedded in daily living experiences. They attributed this difference from the findings suggested by Teale's work to the fact that by the time most of their home visits had started, the parents in the study had attended meetings organized by the school. In these meetings, the teachers had discussed how young children developed skills of reading and writing and the authors suggested that their findings that children were performing school-like reading and writing activities at home may have resulted from the parent's awareness of what is required by schools and their attempt to prepare their children for school entrance. The authors conclude that early literacy experiences of young children may not be just

socially embedded but may be shaped by cultural expectations that shift over time and reflect external pressures such as school policy.

It is disturbing for me, a teacher, to think that the richness of young children's home literacy practices may be limited by the imposition of inappropriate school literacy practices into the home environment. Parents need to be made aware of the rich experiences they already provide for their children rather than trying to make them conform to the way schools support literacy learning. The way school literacy practices impinge on those of the home will be discussed in the next section of this review.

A study by Kendrick and McKay (2004) investigated how children represented their literacy practices as a means of understanding their constructs of literacy. This study illuminated the range of home literacy activities young children experience in a multicultural, urban school setting. The children in the study were asked to draw a picture of reading and writing, either at home or at school. They discussed their pictures with the researchers who were able to group their responses into categories such as social settings, reading and writing practices, and social identities of the children. The researchers were looking at how children perceived literacy practices in the contexts of their lives.

The children depicted a broad array of settings and literacy events in their drawings that may be far richer than the literacy practices that take place in the classroom setting. Children drew themselves engaged in using technology and different forms of literacy

such as music and book making. There were family members and friends in their pictures and images of imagined identities where children are reading and writing. There were very few examples of children engaged in classroom literacy activities, even though the children demonstrated a metalinguistic awareness about themselves as language and literacy users.

Kendrick and McKay's (2004) results showed that children's drawings provide teachers with additional ways of understanding children's literacy practices, because the drawings communicate the diversity of ways in which children see themselves as literate beings. If, as often happens, schools focus on developing children's language abilities as one of the primary means of supporting children's literacy learning, they may be missing other ways children can demonstrate their understanding of what it means to be literate, ways that depict their identity and cultural backgrounds, and ways that may be used to promote their self confidence and ability to learn. This aspect of "hidden learning" is discussed further in the next chapter

### **3. 4. 5. Culture: Summary**

A person's culture, or way of being, impacts both teaching and learning contexts. The basic structure of a person's culture defines whether the learner become part of a formal, hierarchical, learning context, or one where the hierarchy is less obvious and the learner is given an opportunity to decide what and how he or she will learn. Different cultures create, and expect, different learning environments that lead to different ways in which literacy is learned. Cultural expectations about interaction with text, for instance,



whether or not text is to be questioned, imply very different styles of literacy teaching and learning. These differences may lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding and so impact the parent/teacher relationship.

### **3. 5. Power in home/school relations**

No discussion about differences in understanding how children develop literacy can be complete without discussing the imbalance of power both between parents and teachers, and between parents, teachers and the educational system.

The educational establishment has the power to set curriculum, the length of the school day and the number of teachers in a school: parents and teachers, on an individual basis, have very little power to change these things. It is this form of power that is often referred to in the literature.

However, there is another kind of power, the power that teachers and parents can exert over children's learning and this may best be described as agency. It is important to distinguish between these two types of power, as one appears to be absolute while the other may be commutable. Differences in values, beliefs and practices lead to differences in the perceived and actual amount of power and agency parents have in helping their children learn and in their ability to get the help they need from the educational system.

In exploring the culture of power in classrooms, Delpit (1988) described how the needs of black and poor students in the USA are influenced, both explicitly and implicitly, by

issues of institutional power. Teachers, as employees of the institution, have the power to choose which materials to use and what curriculum to deliver, and they set codes and rules for participation in learning relating to ways of talking, writing and interacting. This is often a reflection of the power of the predominant culture. Delpit suggested that in order for students to be able to participate in the power base of the predominant culture, they need to understand these codes and rules. However, it is difficult for them to gain access to the understanding they need in order to exercise their own power, because those with power (the teachers) are frequently unaware of, or unwilling to acknowledge, the power they have.

In a later publication (Delpit, 1991), Delpit related access to power with different forms of literacy use, when she distinguished between personal literacy and power code literacy. Personal literacy is used for entertainment, to further one's own thinking, to clarify one's emotions or to share with intimates; power code literacy allows the user to interact with the wider world in ways that create change. She stated that the way some children develop literacy allows them access to both types and that finding their way into literacy will lead them to power.

This may, in part, account for the difficulty ethnic minorities have in becoming members of government. Delpit suggested that when teaching only encourages the development of personal literacy, children are denied access to the means of power in society. Delpit advocated for the use of teaching methods that support children's development of power

literacy, rather than following the set teaching methods used in many schools that ignore this aspect of literacy learning.

What Delpit (1991) advocates for teacher-student relationships may be applicable to parent-teacher relationships. Parents with limited proficiency in English, whose literacy skills do not allow them to interact with the larger society, may feel powerless and unable to participate in their children's education. They will need support to understand the codes and rules that govern their children's learning before they can participate in it. This resonates with Auerbach's (1995b) social change perspective on family literacy in which she assumes that families' access to literacy resources is a function of the social, political, and economic factors of their environment, rather than a function of family inadequacies or differences in home and school culture. Teachers may not be aware of the codes and rules that they are using in schools, or they may be reluctant to share them with parents. It is difficult to understand how parents and teachers can collaborate to help children learn when this is the case.

Ogbu (1978) took a different approach when he describes how society prevents minorities from gaining access to power, when minorities accept their social status and limitations of status mobility. He stated that a given system of status mobility determines both the kinds of people parents strive to raise their children to be, and the kinds of people children themselves strive to be when they grow up, as they seek traditional ways of being in society. Moreover, he suggested that when schools become complicit in this acceptance of limited status mobility, they transmit to students the type

of qualities they think the students strive to possess when they move into the adult world. However, differences in beliefs about students' status mobility may lead to misunderstanding and conflict between parents and teachers. When parents are recent immigrants to a country, they may not be aware of the potentially different status mobility of their children, and may continue to prepare children for traditional roles in the community and in school. This will put them at odds with an education system that is preparing children for less traditional roles within a different system. Ogbu noted that such situations generate many educational problems, but that this situation may last only until parents perceive and experience their children's education as contributing to access to new and highly rewarding roles in society. When this occurs, they experience a shift in family socialization and they come to stress those qualities they perceive as leading to success in school learning.

This analysis points to the importance of giving parents access to information and experiences that allow them to understand how non-traditional roles can benefit their children, and how the education system is preparing them for these roles. This is an enormous job, and may be beyond the capabilities of individual schools. Instigating this process of change would require support from cultural liaison personnel and even then there is no guarantee that it would happen, as a study by Gunderson and Anderson (2003) demonstrated.

Gunderson and Anderson (2003) explored the attitudes and beliefs of parents and teachers about literacy and literacy learning in three schools with parents from different

ethnic origins. In each school, there was conflict between the parents' and teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, leading to different approaches to finding solutions. In one school, parents had made it obvious to teachers that they valued formal literacy learning and teaching methods focused on rote learning and memorization of facts over the teachers' beliefs that literacy learning should focus on process and exploration. The school had tried to resolve the issue by introducing workbooks and basal readers, but the teachers felt uncomfortable with this compromise.

In the second school, student-led conferences that had been instigated by the school in order to include students in discussions about their learning were not well received by immigrant parents whose children were unable to lead the conferences and this created distrust between the parents and the school. The immigrant parents were concerned about the apparent lack of traditional methods of literacy teaching and found it difficult to approach the teachers about this. In fact, they enrolled their children in a nearby private school that featured traditional skills-based instruction as a solution to this issue.

Students in the third school were mainly Punjabi speaking, with parents who worked on the land. As the school's program became more student-centered, parental dissatisfaction with the teaching in the school grew. Parents were concerned that their children did not get homework on a regular basis, were not tested regularly and were given choices about the books they wanted to read. Gunderson and Anderson (2003) report that the parents' view of reading had been formed by their experiences as Muslims when they had learned to read the Koran by rote. For these parents, their children were being asked to question

what they were reading was offensive to them. They saw the teacher as the one who had knowledge to be transferred to the student rather than knowledge being co-constructed in the classroom. Despite the efforts of a cultural liaison worker, the clash of two belief systems in this school caused communication difficulties between parents and teachers.

When two belief systems come into conflict, relationships of power become apparent.

While there was some move towards finding solutions to the issues in each of these schools none of the solutions were very satisfactory. Neither parents nor teachers had the power to make the changes necessary to resolve the issues.

This study highlights the differences between the power of the educational system, such as setting the curriculum and deciding on pedagogy, and the agency of the parents. The parents felt powerless to change the system so removed their children from the school. In this way the parents were exercising a form of personal power, or agency, in their children's education. It is worth noting that many teachers also feel powerless to change the educational system and may feel as frustrated as the parents on occasion.

Cummins (2000) presents issues of power as agency when emphasizing the importance of interpersonal relations between subordinated communities and dominant group institutions. He states that relations of power in the wider society influence the way educators define their roles and structure the educational system. These relationships of power promote either coercive or collaborative interpersonal relationships, the interpersonal space between teacher and student in which knowledge is generated and

identities negotiated. These relationships can lead either to power being used coercively, as when the teacher sets an agenda the student is expected to follow, or collaboratively, where teachers and students negotiate what learning will take place. These power relationships are not fixed but are generated through interaction. Moreover, Cummins states that students whose school experience reflect collaborative relationships of power have their sense of identity affirmed, and know that their voices will be respected and heard in the classroom and that this power of self-expression leads to increased learning. He states that interactions between students and teachers are never neutral, and that they either reinforce coercive relationships of power or promote collaborative relations of power. He suggests four ways that this collaborative relationship of power may be promoted: the extent to which student's language and cultural background are affirmed in the school; the extent to which instruction promotes intrinsic motivation in students to use language to create their own learning; the extent to which problems of the children are seen as resulting from the institution rather than residing within the children; and the extent to which culturally diverse communities are encouraged to participate in their children's education.

Cummin's (2000) work stresses that the relationship between teacher and learner is an important way of determining how learning takes place. In other words, it is the quality of the relationship between participants in learning situations that influences the amount of learning that takes place. Cummins applied his analysis of power relations to teachers and students, but this analysis of power relationships could also apply to parents and teachers. As in the research by Gunderson and Anderson (2003) cited above, parents who

were unable to negotiate collaborative relationships of power with teachers sent their children to schools that were more traditional in their approach to teaching and learning. Applying this to parent/teacher collaboration within family literacy programs would take the emphasis from delivery of content to the development of the parent/teacher relationship. Cummins suggested the promotion of more parental involvement in children's education as a way of creating collaborative power relationships, but did not offer a way this might be achieved. The promotion of these collaborative power relationships would enhance parents' and teachers' agency to effect children's education but would not address the broader issues of power that is inherent in an educational system.

### **3. 5. 1. Language and power**

There is a major barrier to fostering the type of parent/teacher relationships, and therefore agency, suggested by Cummin's work (2000). If parents and teachers cannot use a shared language to communicate they can only form very superficial relationships. Therefore language differences within multicultural settings lead directly to power imbalances. Parents with limited English language skills are not able to understand, and therefore participate, in their child's school work, and they may be unable to talk to the teacher about their child's schooling in order to clarify any concerns they may have about their child's work. Although schools try to provide translation services for parents, these may not be available at times when they are needed, and delay in providing this service does not help the development of parent/teacher relationships.



Even when parents and teachers speak the same language, miscommunication and limited understanding can occur. Lareau and Shumar (1996), exploring the family-school relationships of white and African American children, pointed out that the same words might mean different things to different people. Epstein (1998) noted that words such as power, authority, and control are not the words most parents use when they express how they want to be involved in their child's education. Commenting on this, Lareau (2000) suggested that parents use words like information, communication, and participation instead. She also suggested that parents and teachers could mean different things when using identical words. Lareau suggested that words such as helpful, supportive, concerned and informed, when used by parents, generally vary in meaning according to their social class. Language used by teachers can be seen by parents as perpetuating awareness of the teachers' expertise, rather than as a form of communication.

There is evidence that parents try to use the type of language used in the school in the home setting. White (2002) reported on case studies about parental support for children's homework activities and notes that the results suggested that there are real consequences of school impinging on home and family roles and relationships. In helping their children with their homework, mothers adopted school like discourse and methods, thus implying that these discourses have more power than family-like discourses. This issue of language and power replicates, to some extent, the issues discussed by Delpit (1988) above.

### **3. 5. 2. Perceived knowledge and power**

Perceived differences in the knowledge bases of parents and teachers lead to differences in how they view their relationship. Teachers may be seen as being more knowledgeable than parents, leading to difficulties in forming partnerships.

Research by Linek, Rasinski and Harkins (1997) showed that teachers believed parental involvement in literacy learning is important, but that teachers do little to promote this involvement, as they did not think parents knew how to support children's learning.

When asked about whether or not parents should have a say in the reading curriculum, over ninety percent of the teachers interviewed were undecided or against this, with the main reason being that they thought the parents were unqualified, because they lacked the knowledge or training of the teachers. The authors concluded by stating that the challenge is to help educational professionals evolve their perceptions of parental involvement in ways that allow them to view parents as partners.

Parents are also unsure about their abilities to help children learn. A study by Hannon and James (1990), in which parents of 40 children between the ages of three and four, who attended a nursery class in one English local education authority, and the children's teachers, were interviewed about the teaching of reading and writing. Results showed that while the parents were taking a very active and positive role in their children's literacy experiences, they were doing this without support from the staff in the nursery and were often unsure that they were doing the right thing. There were differences in parent and teacher views of preschool literacy development. Teachers in the nursery

associated preschool literacy with developing children's interest in books, promoting language development and developing unspecified pre reading and writing skills, while parents were responding to children's requests to learn the names and sounds of letters. This difference in perception of literacy development lead to parents being unable to approach the nursery staff for support in developing their children's literacy, as they saw little evidence of literacy learning as they perceived it taking place in the classroom and that therefore it seemed inappropriate to ask about it.

These research results show how teachers can (often unintentionally) inhibit parents from becoming agents of learning and as a result inadvertently limit children's learning.

### **3. 5. 3. Power in terms of agenda setting**

The lack of teachers' awareness and acknowledgment of how they hinder parents becoming agents for their children's learning is demonstrated by their perceptions of parental support for children's learning. During a year-long ethnographic study in a multiethnic primary school in the UK, Huss-Keeler (1997) examined the influence of teacher perceptions of Pakistani ESL parental involvement in their children's education. The study revealed very different perspectives between home and school. The teachers expected the parents to show interest in their children's learning in ways that related to the school, such as by attending parent evenings (despite the fact that no translation was provided). Huss-Keeler found that while parents did not get involved in the ways the school saw as important, they were involved in other, more passive ways which were culturally relevant and non-threatening. Huss-Keeler noted a wide discrepancy between

the teachers' regard and expectation of those children whose parents were viewed as being interested, versus those not interested. An invitation to the home of two Pakistani children led to teachers gaining a completely different view of what they thought Pakistani homes were like, and in consequence, a readjustment of how they viewed the children's literacy development in class, and the provision of literacy learning resources.

These results are similar to those of Cairney and Ruge (1997), who noted that teachers' assumptions about an aboriginal family's involvement in children's learning were based on impoverished and limited perceptions about the vital role that families play in children's education. The teachers in the study were unaware of the type of support the parent gave to her child and assumed that there was little or no support for learning at home. The parent tried to monitor the children's homework and assumed that if it did not get completed adequately the school would contact her. This had not happened, and it was only when one of the teachers from the family learning center requested an interview with the school teacher that the parent became aware of the teacher's concern over her son's level of work.

The mother gave her children enormous support that involved many hours a week at home and up to five hours a week at the learning center. Yet, because this was not the kind of support that the teachers in the school considered to be ideal, they discounted it. Despite serious health difficulties and economic hardship, the mother had succeeded in completing two basic literacy courses and encouraged her children to share her enthusiasm for learning. The school had made repeated attempts to develop closer ties

with the family and the mother had a good relationship with the teachers, but the type of activities the teachers provided to foster parental involvement - parent teacher evenings, workshops to offer parents new skills and strategies - presented a very narrow definition of parental involvement. The programs offered at the learning center did not seek to change parents but to offer families support. As parents took control of their own worlds, the learning center staff built on family strengths and held families responsible for their own learning. The authors concluded by stating that schools have a special responsibility to move beyond tokenistic approaches to parent involvement towards a partnership with families that acknowledges and builds on the richness of culture and language evident in the community.

Rogers (2003) demonstrates other ways that the school system, as exemplified by teachers, can act to dis-empower parents ability to support their children's learning. Using a critical discourse approach within an ethnographic methodology Rogers documents the interactions of an urban African-American family with the school system. Rogers demonstrates that, despite difficulties with using literacy, the family is engaged in multiple home literacy practices and supports their children's schoolwork in different ways. However, the mother defines her self as a poor reader and attends an adult basic education class in order to increase her scores in reading assessments. For her, literacy is a set of individual acts that she has the responsibility to acquire, and her ability to perform these acts is measured by more knowledgeable others. Despite being involved in a range of socio-cultural uses of literacy (organizing a petition, filling in forms) the mother does not recognize these as literacy practices. When one of her daughters is

tested by the school prior to possible placement in a special education class Rogers relates how, despite the mother having some very good reasons why her daughter should not be so placed, the school discourse and meeting procedures steer her into accepting special school placement for her daughter against her wishes. Her identity as a caring mother and her identity as someone wanting the best education for her child come into conflict and the hidden curriculum inherent in the school system takes precedence over the mothers' beliefs and values. In this way the identity of both the mother and child as being in deficit are perpetuated despite the best efforts of the family to reject this self-perception. Rogers suggests that only by teachers actively questioning their acquisition of ideologies about people's place in the social system can there start to be effective dialogue across differences.

These findings indicate that not only do teachers, either deliberately or by default, often ignore the fact that parents can be agents of learning for their children, but that they may often actually prevent parents from supporting their children's learning because they are not aware of the learning that takes place in the home.

Bernstein (1975) proposed the idea of "invisible" learning when he discussed power imbalances in terms of visible and invisible pedagogies and their relationship to issues of class. He referred to the underlying principles that shape curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation as "educational knowledge" dependent on social principles embedded in educational institutions. He discussed this educational knowledge in two ways: classification and framing.

Classification, the way the content of the curriculum is related, is described as being strong when the contents of the curricula are kept separate from each other, as when students learn history in one class and math in another. Weak classification occurs when the contents of the curricula are intermingled and learning is not discrete and separate (as occurs in many elementary classes). Within classification codes, teacher and pupil possess different degrees of control over the selection, organization, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received.

Bernstein (1975) used the term “frame” to refer to the strength of the boundary between what may be transmitted and what may not be transmitted in the pedagogical relationship. When a teacher is responsible for deciding on the information to be transmitted to the pupil and the pupil is seen as the recipient of this information, framing is described as being strong, and there is a sharp boundary between what is to be learned and what is not to be learned. When the pupil has input into his or her learning and thus there is negotiation between teacher and student about what is learned, the framing is described as being weak, and the boundary between what is learned and not learned becomes blurred.

Methods of teaching and learning may display strong or weak elements of both classification and framing, and the degree to which they do this makes teaching and learning visible or invisible. In schools where both classification and framing are strong, education is visible and conservative, as students, teachers and parents are aware of what

is being taught, learned and evaluated. Both parents and teachers have specific roles to play in helping children learn, as this awareness allows them to confirm their identity and place in society. They may either agree or disagree with the pedagogical processes in school but they know where they stand in connection to them. Although Bernstein (1995) did not use the term, it could be said that there is a strong degree of intersubjectivity between teachers and parents, although there might not be agreement. Any attempt to weaken or change the strength of this classification may be felt as a threat to the existing order and to peoples' roles within it, and may therefore engender criticism, but both parents and teachers will be aware of the issues under discussion.

In schools where the classification and framing of the educational process are both weak, there is a shift in the balance of power between teacher and pupil, as students may be encouraged to take more responsibility for their learning, leaving teachers to be less directive in their approach to teaching. Learning and teaching become less visible as the pedagogical emphasis changes from what children learn to how they learn. Underlying this approach of learning based on the social construction of knowledge, roles are subject to negotiation rather than being proscribed (as in the situation where there is both strong classification and framing).

Bernstein (2000) stated that in order for parents to move from an understanding of the traditional pedagogical model, where strong frames and classifications is the norm, to a pedagogical model involving weak frames and classification, a change in the understanding of what counts as valid transmission of knowledge is required. This



change requires more than parents acquiring information and understanding about the pedagogical philosophy behind the different approaches, making the invisible pedagogy more visible; it requires parents to rethink their way of being in the world, as it needs a new understanding of the power structures inherent in their children's schooling. For this change to occur, Bernstein suggested that four conditions are required. There must be a clear mandate from the school as to what pedagogies are being used in the school. In order for this to happen, teachers need a high level of ideological consensus and be able to define their pedagogical beliefs. The second condition requires that there is a clear link between what is being taught and how it is being taught. The clarity of this link allows parents to understand how the school is helping their children learn. The third condition relates to the level and clarity of the communication between parents and teachers that allows for a sensitive feedback system that will provide further awareness of the pedagogical approach and how it affects children's learning. This condition has implications for report cards and parent/teacher conferences. The fourth condition relates to how children are evaluated. He states that there needs to be clear criteria for evaluating what has been learned in terms of both the emotional aspects of learning, such as self confidence and responsibility, and outer attributes of the learner such as reading levels and math abilities.

I suggest that by making the invisible pedagogies of the home and the school more visible it may be possible to help parents and teachers understand that there are other ways, more than the ones they know, to help children learn. In this way, parents and teachers may be able to work together for the benefit of children's learning.

### **3. 5. 4. Power: Summary**

Differences in the perception and implementation of power and agency have a direct effect on the creation and implementation of family literacy programs. Teachers and parents have limited power to change the educational system and have to work within its strictures. Teachers and parents who want to work together often have to do so outside regular educational parameters. This puts excessive strain on teachers as they are expected to teach the children in their care and their work with parents is an added burden on their time and resources. Parents too may not be allowed to take time from work to meet with, and talk to their children's teachers and yet may feel that the educational system is asking them to do something for which they are not trained. Neither teachers nor parents can change the basics of the educational system of which they are both part. However, teachers and parents can change the power balance within the schools by learning more about how they can each be agents for children's learning and how they can pool resources and skill.

When teachers hold the power to decide both what literacy skills should be taught and how parents should help their children develop literacy, their assumption of power may lead to a school-to-home transmission model of family literacy programs, something that may ignore the wealth of experience and skills inherent in families. Sharing power with parents, accepting that they have complementary skills that can be used to help children learn may be seen as a way of accessing the wealth that parents bring to the learning situation. But this is not easy to achieve. Many parents have been educated in systems

where all the power for teaching and learning resided in the schools, and therefore they may be unaware of the power they have to help their children learn or of the need for interaction with teachers in North American school systems.

### **3. 6. Chapter summary**

Parents and teachers may have different beliefs and perceptions of literacy and literacy learning. These beliefs and perceptions are the result of cultural experiences, concepts of family and family support for children's learning, and the power balance between families and teachers and educational systems. These differences in beliefs and values may often lead to lack of a common basis of understanding, without which there is no possibility of argument or discussion between parents and teachers that might lead to changes in how they relate to one another in ways that benefit children's learning.

This literature review demonstrates the complexity of the issues facing parents and teachers as they collaborate to help children's literacy development. If, as the literature suggests, parents and teachers need common knowledge and understanding on which to build communication, this review of the range of beliefs and understandings about literacy, family, culture and power indicates that this common understanding may be difficult to achieve. Parents and teachers who have experienced different educational systems will differ in their understanding of what it means to be literate and how parents can help children's literacy development.

It is relatively easy to understand that there may be differences between cultures but there will also be differences within cultures. Not all teachers come from the same background with the same amount and type of training and may understand literacy and literacy development in different ways. Not all parents from one culture will have been through the same educational system and have the same views about how to help their children learn.

It would be easy to take a simple approach to this problem, an approach in which teachers, the ones with perceived power resulting from their status and training, take the lead by telling parents what they think they should be doing to help their children. Past experience, both in the classroom and through research, has shown that this approach has its limitations within multicultural settings. However, despite the problems and difficulties associated with parent/teacher collaboration, I have found during my teaching career that both parents and teachers want this collaboration to take place.

## **CHAPTER 4: DESIGN OF THE STUDY 'SEARCHING FOR COMMON UNDERSTANDING'**

### **4. 1. Introduction**

This research initially arose from work I did on a large national study (Multiliteracy Research Project, 2002), which explored the teaching practices that prepare children for the literacy challenges of a globalized, networked, culturally diverse world. As part of this project I conducted research in a number of schools situated in an urban area in Canada. One case was particularly interesting, not only from a multiliteracy viewpoint, but also relative to questions of parent/teacher relationships and the common understanding that exists between parents and teachers. Interview data from this case was re-analyzed in terms of parent/teacher relationships and forms Phase 1 of this study.

The teachers in this inner city, multicultural elementary school demonstrated enormous goodwill in working with parents. One of the school goals was to ensure that teachers supported parental involvement in children's learning. This goal was reflected in the range of opportunities teachers made to connect with parents. The teachers were following many of the ways to increase parental involvement that are suggested by the literature (e.g. Epstein, 1998). Teachers translated notices into the first languages of the parents, regularly invited parents into classrooms, and provided a range of family literacy initiatives to which all parents were invited. Despite these efforts, the teachers were experiencing difficulties connecting with many of the parents. It became evident that this

case in the Multiliteracy Research Project was particularly relevant to questions of how parents and teachers work towards common understanding. Therefore, to investigate these issues using a larger sample base, an extension to the original case study was designed. This constitutes Phase 2 of my study.

My purpose in conducting the study "Searching for Common Understanding" was to determine the amount and type of shared understanding between parents and teachers about a parent's role in helping young children's literacy development. The questions used to guide this study were:

- 1) What beliefs and expectations do parents and teachers in a multicultural, inner city elementary school hold about a parent's role in literacy education?
- 2) What, if any, are the common areas of understanding these parents and teachers have that may be used to promote the development of effective parent/teacher partnerships?
- 3) How can this information be used to suggest how the family literacy programs may be adapted to increase the communication alignment between parents and teachers?

The nature of the research questions suggested that a case study approach would be an appropriate research methodology. Case study research is an appropriate method to use when the researcher has no control over the behavior of the research subjects or events,

and wants to focus on situations that are happening in the present. This method is useful when the phenomenon to be explored is based in a real life context (Yin, 1994). Case study methods are also useful when the aim of the research is to increase understanding of a particular situation (Stake, 1995). The use of this research methodology allows for in-depth descriptions of how things are at a particular place and time, and serves to illuminate events in ways that lead to increased understanding (Flyvbjerg, 2004). Case study research can add to a body of knowledge because, through the understanding of one case, it may be possible to add to the understandings of all similar cases (Stake, 1995).

Research that uses a case study methodology has limitations. The study of one case is a poor basis for generalization; the emphasis on interpretation of data may lead to subjectivity in reporting results; and there are ethical risks when observing and reporting human behavior. However, case study methodology can usefully provide an understanding of one particular complex activity if care is taken to address these limitations.

#### **4. 2. Design of the study.**

The present study consists of two phases:

- Phase 1 of this study was conducted from November 2003 to June 2004. The first phase of the present study was an exploratory case study undertaken as part of a larger national research study. Results from this case study informed the research

questions used in the second phase of the study. Data from this case was reanalyzed and reevaluated in terms of these research questions.

- Phase 2 of this study was conducted from November 2005 to June 2006. The second phase of this study was designed to provide a larger sample base and to explore in detail some of the issues that had arisen during phase 1.

#### **4. 2. 1. Choice of the case**

This particular school was chosen for this research study because data from the initial, exploratory case study showed that teachers in this school were actively seeking ways to increase parent participation in school-based family literacy programs. In order to facilitate home/school interaction, the teachers met regularly to discuss ways of making the school as welcoming as possible to parents. They sent home welcome notices and other information translated into the first languages of the parents, displayed the work children had produced in their first language and opened their classrooms for the parents to see what their children were doing in class. The office was always open for parent queries. There were teaching and non-teaching staff members who spoke different languages and were ready to act as translators for parents as required. For these reasons the case could be considered a critical case, one where it could be said that if parent/teacher collaboration did not work here it was less likely to work anywhere else (Flyvbjerg, 2004).



Initial data from the multiliteracy case study and my experience as a teacher suggested that beliefs and expectations about a parent's role in helping children's literacy development varied considerably between different ethnic groups. This school provided the diversity needed to test this assumption as the parents of the children who attended the school came from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and educational systems. Some parents had been born and educated in Canada, and others had been educated abroad before emigrating to Canada.

The diversity of the parent population meant that the teachers in the school were trying to work with parents who had many different languages and levels of ability to speak English. Data from Phase 1 of this study indicated that although many of the parents in the school spoke English either as a first language or a second language, there was a large group of parents who did not feel confident enough in their command of English to use it with the teachers. These language differences added an extra dimension to the issue of parents and teachers working together.

#### **4. 2. 2. The research site**

The school, situated in an urban setting in Canada, had recently been designated an alternate school based on its philosophy of teacher collaboration, student leadership and anecdotal reporting system. Approximately 500 students from Kindergarten to grade 7 are enrolled in the school. Most of the students come from the local area with the exception of a few students whose parents admire the school philosophy and have opted to send their children to the school. Within the school there are approximately 26

language groups, the largest language groups being English, Vietnamese and Chinese.

The school has 22 enrolling divisions, including a district communication skills program that supports children who have been designated as having communication difficulties.

The school is housed in an older red brick, three-storey building with two portable classrooms placed adjacent to it that are used for the school's music program. At the time of the study, parents and teachers were working with architects to design a new school building. Students have access to both a black top playground and an adjacent park that they use freely during recess and lunchtime. There are often groups of children doing schoolwork in the park during warm weather.

On the ground floor of the main building there is a central, open area accessed directly from the front door of the school. Stairs off this space lead to the second floor and the basement. The school office, administrator's office, staff room, learning resources room, and washroom all open on to this space, making it a hub of school activity. This space holds some children's lockers, notice boards, a couch, chairs and a table. Children's artwork is visible on the walls and there are always teachers, parents and children using the space throughout the day for a variety of activities.

#### **4. 2. 3. School organization and philosophy**

There is a professional teaching and support staff of 54 administrators, teachers, office staff and learning support staff. All members of the staff are included in the discussions and decision-making processes within the school. These decisions are made in 45-minute

meetings that take place every Thursday morning before school, during which time there are opportunities to discuss programs and practice.

The school philosophy is one of mutual respect, student leadership, collaboration, inclusion and an open door policy for children and parents. Within the school there is a strong feeling of “family” fostered by multi grade classrooms and students calling the teachers by their first names. The students are given time and space in which to openly and respectfully express their feelings. On entering the school you are aware of children working in small groups in the hallways to which they have free access at all times. Parents are welcome in the school, and teachers, parents and students may be seen comingling throughout the school at all times of the day.

Classrooms contain desks and tables as well as sofas and chairs that are used for class meetings and individual or small group work. The walls are covered in children’s work and, unless the classroom door is closed, there is constant movement between the classes and the rest of the school.

The school emphasizes student leadership and students are encouraged to collaborate, discuss and participate in all aspects of their learning and teaching. Older, more socially able students are encouraged to support younger, less experienced students by becoming “reading buddies” and participating in programs that help develop the learning skills of their younger schoolmates.

The school organization has several distinctive features. There is a system of teaching within the school where two or more teachers jointly plan and deliver the educational program of all their students. This teaming allows for greater flexibility of the instructional group. While some students are working in small groups under the leadership of one teacher, the second teacher can be helping others and teachers can teach to their strengths, thus providing a better educational setting for the students. The school has also become a centre for teacher education and during any school year has up to twenty pre-service teachers on site. Classroom teachers take responsibility for meeting the diverse range of student learning needs, and the team teaching partnership enables teachers to work intensively with individuals or small groups of students to better meet the specific needs of students designated as ESL or Special Needs. Additionally, resource teachers meet the needs of these students within the classroom or on a pull out basis.

Uniquely within the local School Board, the school has permission not to use letter grades for intermediate student report cards. Instead of the usual letter grades, report cards reflect the aims of teacher teams, classroom programs, student self-assessment, and criteria-based rating scales.

The school places great emphasis on collaboration at all levels of school governance with consensus decision making in staff meetings, Student Council, and assemblies. The Parent Advocacy Team and Parent Advisory Council encourage discussion on school issues, provide advice on policy and procedures, and support school programs and special events. Parent meetings are often held in the staff room during the school day and after

school, and parent representatives are welcome to attend and have input during staff meetings and discussion about school planning.

#### **4. 2. 4. Literacy teaching and learning**

The teachers in the school believe that children develop literacy in the context of their daily schoolwork. Rather than presenting specific lessons on reading and writing, they provide children with a wide range of learning experiences and encourage them to present the results of their learning in many ways. This leads to children using a range of artifacts to present their learning and allows children with limited proficiency in English to show what they have learned. Within these learning experiences children are taught the skills they need to improve their reading and writing.

#### **4. 2. 5. Parental involvement in literacy learning**

Although the school does not have a formally written policy about parental involvement in children's literacy development, teachers encourage parents to help their children in three ways. Children and parents are encouraged to participate in a home reading program. Every day children are given a book to take home to share with their parents. Parents who participate in the program either listen to their child read the book or read the book to the child. The teachers may, or may not, keep a record of which books the child takes home.

The second way teachers encourage parents to be involved in children's literacy development is by opening their classrooms to parents for the first fifteen minutes of

every day. Parents are encouraged to share books with small groups of children or to hear a child read a book of choice. These activities help parents understand the importance of sharing books with their children, while helping children develop their reading skills. The third way teachers encourage parental involvement in children's literacy learning is by providing a range of family literacy programs designed to support parents in helping their children's literacy development. Some of the programs are described below.

#### **4. 2. 6. Family literacy programs in the school**

The school staff arranges a variety of family literacy events during the school year. Some of these take place over several days or weeks, others at set times during the year. The researcher observed several of these programs; the following is a partial list of those programs that involved parents, teachers and young children.

##### **4. 2. 6. 1. Literacy Fair**

The Literacy Fair is an annual weeklong celebration of students' work. The work on display at one fair included verbal presentations and posters about well known artists, scale models and information on the solar system, models of set designs for stories written by the students, photographs by the students of activities within the school, a student video production, and a newspaper written and produced by the students that contained information on sports, entertainment, travel and research news as well as comic strips and reports of personal travel. Three classes produced a play about homelessness

and, with the support of teachers and artists in residence, had developed the script, dances, sets and music for the performances that parents and others were invited to see.

#### **4. 2. 6. 2. Books for Breakfast**

The “Books for Breakfast” program is a student run program held twice a week before school starts. Grade 7 student volunteers help parents and children choose and read books together. The program depends on the willingness of Grade 7 students to arrive at school early and spend time with parents and children. The teacher who had instigated this program and trained the students to run it reported that the program had not been very successful. She stated that although older students enjoyed the program, the targeted group, preschoolers, didn’t come and as a result the students who were running the program gave up.

The Vice Principal of the school decided that a new approach to this program might make it more successful. The program was redesigned to show how parents could share books with their children. Each morning, for a period of four weeks, a teacher was asked to read a book with the children and parents in the common area and to stress a specific reading strategy. However, this approach lasted for only two weeks, as it was difficult for the classroom teachers to commit to spending this time with children and parents rather than with the children in their own classroom, and very few parents brought their children to these sessions.

#### **4. 2. 6. 3. Mother Goose Drop in Program**

This program is held on a weekly basis in a spare classroom in the main school building. It is set up and administered by a coordinator from a local Neighborhood Community Center. Parents and grandparents of preschool aged children from the neighborhood and those children registered at the school and their siblings were invited through fliers, leaflets and by word of mouth to share activities with their young children.

The room is set up with simple puzzles, colored pencil and paper, children's books and games and materials for completing a special activity. On the occasion the researcher was present, the special activity of the day was making a paper bag puppet by sticking precut colored circles and antennae onto the bag in such a way that it looked like a caterpillar. The children and their parents spend some time participating in the activities then the tables are cleared and they sit on the floor in a circle and sing nursery rhymes and children's songs before leaving to go home for lunch.

When the researcher first observed the program there were twelve adults participating: one father, one grandfather, one grandmother and nine mothers. Nine of the adults brought one child and three of them brought two children. The children were aged from a few months to four years old. All the parents attending this session had English as a second language. The program leader explained that the aim of the program was to make connections with parents in order to help them prepare their children for kindergarten by exposing them to the school setting. The program also aims to provide the parents with



skills to help their children learn and to help the parents develop a supportive social network.

#### **4. 2. 6. 4. Family Games Day**

A group of teachers who teach classes in which there are children from kindergarten and grades 1 and 2 wanted to help parents understand the role of play in children's learning by arranging a family games day. Children were encouraged to bring games from home into school to show other students how they were played. The games the children brought to school came from many different parts of the world and included several that the teachers had never seen before. On Family Games Day, family members were invited into the school gymnasium where groups of students demonstrated how to play the games. The teachers reported that many parents and extended family members came to this event. The students in the class, older students or family members translated when necessary.

#### **4. 2. 6. 5. Kindergarten Orientation**

This program takes place in late June for parents of children who will be entering the school later in the year. Parents and children are invited to a classroom to participate in a range of learning activities such as using learning centers, puppet making and free play with paper and crayons. For each of these activities the teachers prepared a card with a description of the activity on one side and a list of what the children would be learning on the other side. Later in the morning a teacher reads a story to the children before they are led off for a snack. The remaining parents are then encouraged to ask the teachers about

what they saw before rejoining their children. The parents are then given crayons, paper and a game to take home to use with their children.

The five programs listed above were formally organized, school-based family literacy programs but they were not the only family literacy initiatives in the school. Two other, less formally organized, school initiatives included teachers of children in Kindergarten, grade 1 and 2 inviting parents to spend twenty minutes each morning reading to small groups of children and previously, when a multicultural worker had been available, the provision of coffee mornings for parents from different ethnic groups. Although not directly related to family literacy, two teachers of children in the higher grades telephoned the parents of every child in their class once a month to discuss the child's progress. Despite the efforts of the teachers to encourage parents to support their children's literacy development, parent participation remained low.

#### **4. 3. Choice of participants**

A total of 25 parents, 13 teachers and five support staff were interviewed for this study. The parent participants included nine parents who were non-English speakers, six who spoke English as a second language, and 10 for whom English was their first language. Of the teacher participants, two were school administrators, six were teachers of children in kindergarten, grade 1 and 2, three were teachers of children in grades 2, 3 and 4, one teacher of a grades 5, 6 and 7 class, and one was the English as a second language teacher. Two of the teachers were interviewed in both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of this study. The five support staff interviewed in this study included two multicultural workers, a

family literacy program coordinator, a district-based specialist in English as a second language, and a speech and language consultant (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Number of Participants in the study*

Phase	Participants	Descriptors
1	Parents	4 Chinese-speaking parents 4 English-speaking parents
1	Teachers	Vice-Principal 1 classroom teacher
1	Support staff	Mother Goose Program coordinator
1 and 2	Teachers	ESL teacher Grade 2, 3, 4
2	Parents	5 Vietnamese- speaking parents 5 Parents who spoke English as a second language (First languages: Spanish, Dutch, Hindi, Fijian, Heiltsuk) 7 English-speaking parents
2	Teachers	Principal 6 Grade K, 1, 2 1 Grade 2, 3, 4
2	Support staff	Multicultural worker -Vietnamese Multicultural worker – Filipino Speech and Language consultant English as a Second Language Consultant

\* Two teachers were interviewed in both Phase 1 and Phase 2.

The study was concerned with parental involvement in children's early literacy development and as a result parent participation was restricted to those parents with children in kindergarten and grades 1-3, and to four English-speaking parents who were members of the Parent Teacher Association and volunteered to be interviewed for this study. Teacher participation was restricted to the teachers who taught students in kindergarten and grades 1-3, and other teachers directly involved in creating and presenting school-based family literacy programs. The two multicultural workers interviewed in this study worked with Vietnamese and Filipino parents, two of the main ethnic groups within the school's population. The responses of the multicultural workers to the research questions consisted of both their personal experiences and comments about issues parents brought to them. The Vietnamese multicultural worker also translated for a group of five parents who spoke little English. An important aspect of this study was the ethnicity of participants and their ability to communicate in English. This was determined by asking the participants where they went to school as a child, and whether or not they needed an interpreter at the interview.

#### **4. 3. 1. Issues with sampling**

Every effort was made to ensure that the choice of participants in this study presented a range of views about teacher and parental perceptions of a parent's role in helping children's literacy development. All the teachers of children in kindergarten and grades 1, 2 and 3 were interviewed, as well as administrators and teachers involved in the creation and presentation of the family literacy programs in the school. The parents who participated in the study were those who expressed an interest in the issues being

discussed and care was taken to ensure that they represented the diversity of the parent population (see Table 2 later in this section for more details). Members of the District staff, working in the field of parent/teacher relationships, were interviewed to obtain their perspectives on the issues under investigation.

#### **4. 3. 2. Sampling of parent participants**

There were some differences between Phase 1 and Phase 2 in how the parent sample was selected.

##### **4. 3. 2. 1. Parent sampling in Phase 1**

In the Phase 1 of the study, interviews were conducted with four Chinese-speaking parents and four English-speaking parents. The Chinese-speaking parents were interviewed individually as they attended the Mother Goose program with their preschool children. Translation, where necessary, was provided by either the Chinese-speaking program assistant or by a bilingual mother who was also attending the program. The four English-speaking parents interviewed in this phase of the study were interviewed as a group in the staffroom. Parents, who participated in family literacy programs, volunteered to take part in the study.

##### **4. 3. 2. 2. Parent sampling in Phase 2**

As I required a larger number of parents to participate in Phase 2 of the research, a letter was sent to all parents of children in kindergarten and grades 1, 2 and 3 inviting them to take part in this study. The letter, outlining the aims of the study, the level of commitment

required of parents, and consideration of the ethical issues, was written in English and also translated into the two main languages, Vietnamese and Chinese, of the parents whose children attended the chosen grades (see appendices). At the suggestion of the teachers, these invitations were handed out during a parent/teacher evening in the school and teachers collected the names of those parents who expressed interest in being part of the study. It is not clear how many parents received invitations at this time, but only eight parents indicated that they would be willing to participate in the study, of which four were from the mainstream culture and four spoke English as a second language. Five parents indicated that they did not want to participate in the study. Two of these parents were from the mainstream culture and three spoke Vietnamese as their first language. Meetings were scheduled with five of the eight parents who indicated that they would be willing to participate in the study.

In order to obtain more parental participation in the study, teachers were asked to provide names of the parents of children in their class whom they thought would be interested in discussing the issues. This procedure resulted in teachers offering 12 extra names; six of these parents spoke English as a first language and five spoke English as a second language and one did not speak English. Invitations were sent to these parents asking them if they would participate in the study. The researcher followed up these invitations with a personal phone call. The multicultural worker spoke to the non English-speaking parent. All 12 of the parents approached in this way agreed to participate in the study and were invited to meet the researcher on dates that were convenient for them. Despite setting up interview times to meet the needs of the parents, five parents did not arrive for

meetings at the times agreed; of these parents two spoke English as a second language, two spoke English as a first language and one was non-English speaking.

As there had been no responses from parents whose English language ability was limited, a Vietnamese multicultural worker was asked to select parents from her ethnic group who might be willing to participate in the study and to invite them, as a group, to a meeting and to be interviewed. The multicultural worker agreed to act as translator for this meeting. Five Vietnamese non-English speaking parents agreed to meet me and were interviewed as a group in the school staffroom.

These sampling procedures resulted in the researcher conducting interviews with 17 parents in Phase 2 of the study, seven of whom spoke English as a first language, five of whom spoke English as a second language and five of whom were non-English speakers.

In total, 25 parents participated in this study: eight in Phase 1 and 17 in Phase 2. Nine were non-English speaking parents, with four parents speaking Chinese and five parents speaking Vietnamese. Of these non-English speaking parents seven were mothers, one a Chinese-speaking grandmother and one a Vietnamese-speaking father. The Vietnamese father was married to one of the Vietnamese mothers in the group. The Chinese-speaking parents were interviewed during the Phase 1 of the study.

Five mothers with English as a second language participated in the study. Four of the mothers had been educated in countries other than Canada and one had been educated on

a First Nations reservation within Canada. Eleven parents in this study had been born and educated in Canada. Of these one had been home-schooled for part of her education. There were two fathers in this group of parents, one of whom was married to a mother in the study.

The eight parents who participated in the Phase 1 of the study all had preschool aged children attending the drop-in program at the school and six of them had older children attending the school. The 17 parents who participated in Phase 2 of the study all had a child in kindergarten or one of the first three grades in school and three of the parents also had a child in a higher grade in the school.

For most of the parents the school was their neighborhood school, meaning that their children would automatically be enrolled in the school unless they chose otherwise. Four of the English-speaking Canadian parents had chosen to place their child in this school rather than their neighborhood school.

Table 2 provides an overview of the parents who participated in this study and a coding so that the responses presented in the results chapter can be attributed to them.



Table 2

*Parent participants in the study*

Phase	Code	Ethnicity	Language	Schooling
1	P1C.	Chinese-Canadian mother	Non-E	China
1	P2C.	Chinese-Canadian mother	Non-E	China
1	P3E.	Canadian mother	English	Canada
1	P4C.	Chinese-Canadian	Non-E	China
1	P5C.	Chinese-Canadian	Non-E	China
1	P6E.	Canadian mother	English	Canada
1	P7E.	Canadian mother	ESL	Canada
1	P8E.	Canadian mother	English	Canada
2	P9V.	Vietnamese-Canadian mother	Non-E	Vietnam
2	P10V.	Vietnamese-Canadian mother	Non-E	Vietnam
2	P11V.	Vietnamese-Canadian mother	Non-E	Vietnam
2	P12V.	Vietnamese-Canadian mother	Non-E	Vietnam
2	P13V.	Vietnamese-Canadian father	Non-E	Vietnam
2	P14ESL.	Canadian mother/grandmother	ESL	Canada
2	P15E.	Canadian mother*	English	Canada/home-schooling
2	P16E.	Canadian mother	English	Canada
2	P17E.	Canadian father	English	Canada
2	P18E.	Canadian mother *	English	Canada

Phase	Code	Ethnicity	Language	Schooling
2	P19E.	Canadian mother	English	Canada
2	P20ESL.	Dutch/Canadian mother	ESL	Holland
2	P21ESL.	Fijian/Canadian mother	ESL	Fiji
2	P22ESL.	Columbian/Canadian mother	ESL	Columbia
2	P23ESL.	Indian/Canadian mother	ESL	India
2	P24E.	Canadian father*	English	Canada
2	P25E.	Canadian mother*	English	Canada

\* Indicates those parents who have opted to place their children in this school.

#### 4. 3. 3. Sampling of teacher participants

Four teachers were interviewed in Phase 1 of the study, all of whom were directly involved in family literacy initiatives in the school. Two were classroom teachers with particular interest in parent involvement initiatives, one provided English language support to small groups of students, and one was the Vice Principal of the school who was involved in coordinating parent involvement and family literacy initiatives in the school.

Eleven teachers were interviewed in Phase 2 of the study. Six of the teachers taught classes containing children in kindergarten, grade 1 and 2. Of these six teachers, one teacher had participated in Phase 1 of the study and one was able to speak Cantonese. Three more teachers taught classes containing children in grades 2, 3 and 4, while another teacher worked with children needing English language support and had also been

involved in Phase 1 of the study. The Principal of the school also participated in Phase 2 of this study.

In total, thirteen teachers were interviewed for this study, two of who participated in both Phase 1 and Phase 2. Table 3 provides an overview of the teachers who participated in this study with a code that allows attribution of their comments. All teachers, in both Phase 1 and Phase two of the study, were aware of the research and agreed to participate.

Table 3

*Teacher participants in the study*

Phase	Code	Gender	Position	Grades taught
1	T1	F	Classroom teacher	2, 3, 4
1/2	T2	F	ESL teacher	K-7
1	T3	F	Vice-Principal	
2	T4	F	Classroom teacher	7
2	T5	M	Classroom teacher	2, 3, 4
1/2	T6	F	Classroom teacher	2, 3, 4
2	T7	F	Classroom teacher	K, 1, 2
2	T8	F	Classroom teacher	K, 1, 2
2	T9	F	Classroom teacher	K, 1, 2
2	T10	F	Classroom teacher	K, 1, 2
2	T11	F	Classroom teacher	K, 1, 2

Phase	Code	Gender	Position	Grades taught
2	T12	F	Classroom teacher	K, 1, 2
2	T13	M	Principal	

#### **4. 3. 4. Sampling of support staff participants**

In Phase 1 of the study, one support staff member was interviewed: she was the coordinator of the family literacy program to which four of the parents interviewed in this phase of the study brought their preschool aged children.

In Phase 2 of the study interviews were conducted with four other support staff. These included: two multicultural workers who represented different ethnicities within the school (Vietnamese and Filipino); the district coordinator for English as a Second language; and a Speech and Language consultant. The Speech and Language Consultant had responsibility for supporting children with speech problems within the school and had also, with a colleague, developed a program to help parents learn new ways of interacting with their children that will be referred to later in this study (A Communication Framework, 2005). The District Consultant for English as a Second Language was interviewed about her views on the issues parents with limited English faced as they help their children learn. The support staff participants, in both Phase 1 and Phase 2, were aware of the study and agreed to be interviewed.

Table 4

*Support staff participants in the study*


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Phase	Code	Position
2	SS1	Multicultural worker -Vietnamese
2	SS2	Multicultural worker – Filipino
2	SS3	Speech and Language consultant
2	SS4	English as a Second Language Consultant
1	SS5	Family Literacy Program Coordinator

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**4. 4. Role of the researcher**

Earlier in my teaching career I had spent one year teaching a class of grade 5, 6 and 7 children in this school and, as a result, had gained a detailed awareness of the school's ethos. For this research, I was introduced to the parents and teachers as someone who was a retired teacher who had once taught in the school and was now a researcher at a Canadian university exploring issues around parent/teacher collaboration in children's literacy development. As someone with a deep, personal interest in the relationship between parents and teachers, I came to this research with aims and goals that need to be made explicit. While the results of this research will inform the area of parent/teacher relations, my aim is to help teachers provide the kind of family literacy programs that benefit children's learning. In this research, I assumed the role of researcher as teacher (Stake, 1995). In this role the researcher wants to use the results of research to provide examples that may be used to guide others in their practices.

During the interviews with parents, I presented myself as a sympathetic listener and, after telling the parents the questions I would be asking them, allowed them to comment on the questions in any way they wanted to, only asking for clarification when a point did not seem clear to me. Towards the end of the interviews, I ensured that parents had addressed all the research questions by repeating a question as required. Any comments I made during the interview were to ask the parents to clarify what they had said or to redirect the parents to the research questions. In this way, I ensured that the parents were not influenced by any preconceived ideas I may have held. Other measures that were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the data are presented in section 4. 7.

#### **4. 5. Data collection procedures**

Phase 1 of this study took place between September 2003 and June 2004 and consisted of exploratory interviews, observation, field notes, and the collection of literature about the family literacy initiatives in the school. Phase 2 of this research took place between November 2005 and June 2006. Data collection in this phase of the study consisted of interviews, group discussions, expert interviews, document analysis, and observations of family literacy programs.

During the time lapse between the two parts of the study the Vice Principal, who had coordinated teacher support for the Books For Breakfast program, had left the school and this program was now in the care of a classroom teacher. This program was continuing but had less teacher support than previously. The family literacy programs that were

present during Phase 1 continued during Phase 2, with the addition of Family Games Day. There were few staff changes or changes to the programs in the two phases of data collection.

#### **4. 5. 1. Direct Observation**

In both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of this study, I conducted observations of several family literacy programs in order to better understand the nature of the programs and identify issues of parental participation. The annual Literacy Fair was observed twice. During the day assigned for the Literacy Fairs, I went from room to room with parents to look at the displays of children's work and to talk informally to children, teachers and parents. I observed the "Books for Breakfast" program four times: teachers conducted three of these sessions and students one session. I also observed the Mother Goose Drop in Program four times. A classroom Read Together time, where parents were encouraged to stay to read books with the children in the class, was observed once. The purpose of these observations was to gain an understanding of the nature of the programs and to observe the parent/teacher interaction that took place during the programs. The number of times I observed each program depended on the school's timetable and scheduling.

#### **4. 5. 2. Documentation**

Several documents were collected in both Phase 1 and Phase 2 for later analysis. These included information on the school's philosophy, the aims and procedures of family literacy programs, details of grant applications, and copies of information leaflets that were provided for parents. Examples of children's work, such as school newspapers and

cookie recipes, were collected during two Literacy Fairs. This document analysis allowed me to understand how the school's philosophy matched the aims and presentation of the family literacy programs and the teachers' attempts to contact parents. Copies of the children's work helped me to understand how the teachers were developing children's literacy skills.

#### **4. 5. 3. Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were an important part of the collection of data for this study. In Phase 1 of the study, interviews were based on semi-structured questions about how parents supported their children's learning, why they attended the family literacy program, how parents and teachers could work together to support children's learning, and the issues parents and teachers faced in trying to achieve this (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the interview protocol used in this phase of the study). The purpose of the questions was to learn about the parents' practices in helping their children's literacy development, why they participated in the Mother Goose family literacy program, and to explore teachers' issues about enrolling parents into the program. The questions used in this phase of the study were refined into three research questions for use in Phase 2.

In Phase 2 of the study the three research questions were modified into more specific questions appropriate to the audiences. In order to address the first research question, "What beliefs and expectations do parents and teachers hold about a parent's role in children's early literacy development?" parents were asked to describe what they considered to be the most important ways they helped their children's literacy



development, and teachers and support workers were asked to describe what they considered to be the most important ways parents could help their children.

In order to address the second research question, “What, if any, are the common areas of understanding between parents and teachers that may be used to promote the development of effective parent/teacher partnerships?” parents were asked whether or not they felt that the school could help them support their children’s literacy learning and, if so, how could this be achieved. Teachers and support workers were asked whether or not they felt that the school could support the parents in helping their children learn and if so, what they considered the most effective aspects of this support.

The third research question, “How can these findings be used to create an analytic framework that, when applied to existing Family Literacy programs, suggests how the programs may be adapted to increase the communication alignment between parents and teachers?” was addressed by analyzing and combining the data from the first two questions.

These were semi-structured interviews. The questions above were used as prompts and generated narratives and a range of responses in all cases. A sample of the actual questions used is in the appendices.

All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder with parallel computer recording used for back up purposes where possible. The computer used was a Macintosh computer with the software program Garage Band. The use of this software allowed the

researcher to listen to the interviews on the computer while transcribing them (see Appendix 2 for a copy of the transcript protocols).

#### **4. 5. 3. 1. Interview procedure**

Teacher interviews took place in an empty classroom during lunchtimes and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Teachers were interviewed in team teaching groups, usually two teachers per session. Administrators and district staff were interviewed individually in their offices, and interviews with multicultural workers took place in private in the school staff room.

All parent interviews lasted between 40 and 50 minutes, and took place in a designated room in the school shortly after the parents had brought their children into school in the morning. These interviews were conducted at times parents were able to attend and resulted in ten parents being interviewed individually, two parents were interviewed together, and on two occasions, there were four parents present. The group interview with the five non-English speaking parents and the translator took place in the staffroom.

#### **4. 5. 3. 2. Issues with the interview procedure**

Despite the interview procedures being set up with as much care as possible, there were issues of translation outside my control that may have had a bearing on the results. The multicultural worker, who had invited the parents to the meeting, translated my questions to the parents, and their responses to me.

However, during the meeting two issues relating to this translation procedure emerged. When I asked parents about how the school helped them help their children learn, the translator suggested that the question be put in a different way. She stated that that the question, as posed, would be incomprehensible to the parents. She suggested that she adapt the question to one of why the parents thought that many Vietnamese children appeared to be behind in their schooling and what did they think the school could do about it. The responses of the parents to the revised question did indicate that they were unwilling to question the educational system, despite concerns about their children dropping behind in their learning. The multicultural worker had been right in her assessment of the need to put the questions into a framework that was understandable to the parents, and this process allowed me to obtain a greater understanding of the parents' responses.

A second issue related to how the translator conducted the translation. The translator often allowed several of the parents to comment on a question and then she translated what she interpreted as the meaning of the parents' comments, rather than their exact words. This form of translation created difficulties for me in knowing which parent had made specific comments. I did not interfere in this translation process, despite the difficulties in attribution of particular comments, as I was aware that the parents were quite nervous about commenting freely in the presence of someone they felt might have had authority over their children, and that they felt more at ease responding to the translator than directly to me. While I had no reason to suspect that the translator influenced the data in any way, this situation needs to be noted.

Another issue that arose in the interviews with all the parents was the tendency of parents to be distracted from the focus on children's literacy learning and to comment on children's learning in general. Although I tried to direct the parents' comments to literacy and literacy learning, I felt that these more general comments remained relevant for this study, as the parents were discussing young children's learning in the overall context of the multiple approaches to literacy adopted by the school,

During several of the interviews, both the parents and the teachers expressed strong emotions. These emotions ranged from frustration and anxiety to laughter and relief. A set pattern began to emerge with the parent interviews. Initially the interviewee, while appearing quite relaxed, would address the research questions cautiously. As the interview progressed interviewees would become more open in their responses. On several occasions, after I had turned off the recording equipment and thanked them, the interviewees started to talk about the topic again, often in a more animated way than previously. When this happened I asked permission to turn the recording equipment back on. On one occasion the interviewee asked that the recorder be turned off before she made some comments. I asked if I could make notes on what she said, and the interviewee agreed to this. Although I was concerned initially that the presence of recording equipment might inhibit the parents' responses this was not the case. It only appeared to be intimidating to this one interviewee, who did not want anything recorded that might have been construed as being prejudicial to the parenting skills of the families with whom she worked.

## **4. 6. Data Analysis**

### **4. 6. 1. Data Analysis Procedure**

In qualitative research, data analysis is an iterative process that is combined with data collection (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Repeated reviews of field notes yielded recurrent themes and documents were analyzed for indications of teachers' beliefs about the parental role in helping children's literacy development. Transcripts of interviews were read and reread and themes noted. By comparing and reviewing these notes I was able to construct tentative categories and sub categories of themes within the data. This understanding of the structure of the data facilitated my use of the computer software used to refine the interview data analysis.

### **4. 6. 2. Analysis of Interview Data**

The transcripts of interviews were analyzed using Nvivo™ software, a program that allows for the researcher to display and analyze relationships between people, processes and concepts ([www.qsrinternational.com](http://www.qsrinternational.com)). This software program allows researchers to create main topics describing broad categories of interest into which can be placed relevant comments from the interview data. Each of these main topics may then be subdivided into several sub topics by re-organizing and re-categorizing the data within them. As the process of coding the interview comments takes place, other main and subtopics may be created. Thus the comments made in the interviews are used in an

iterative way to create topics and subtopics, ensuring that the researcher can aggregate the interview comments until something can be said about them as a class.

Before the interview transcripts were coded, it was necessary to create a way of linking the comments to the people who made them that would allow the comments of one group of participants to be compared with those of another. For example, it was important to be able to distinguish between the comments made by the teachers and the comments made by the parents. The ability to compare the comments of different participants was achieved by providing each participant in the study with “attributes” or descriptive notations that allowed comments to be linked to a specific group. The software allows for comments to be attributed in different ways. I created attributes for the comments of each participant in the study based on the following criteria:

- the participant’s relationship to children: parent, grandparent, teacher, or support worker ;
- the ethnicity of the participant: Canadian or, if they had entered Canada from another country, Vietnamese-Canadian, Chinese-Canadian, etc.;
- the first language of the participant and whether or not they were able to communicate in English;
- where they were educated;
- ages of any children the parents had: preschool, grade K-3, mixed ages;
- whether or not parents had selected this school for their child despite it being out of their local school area.

The next step in the data analysis, after each participant had been given appropriate attributes, was to code their comments.

Interview responses may be coded at different levels, such as by specific words, phrases or elements of meaning. The exact words used in an interview express an immediate thought or idea that occurs at the time of the interview, but some of the meaning may be lost when the words are viewed out of context. When the context in which the words were spoken is taken into account, it is possible to attribute meaning to them, but this requires a degree of interpretation on behalf of the researcher. An example of the type of comment that was placed into each classification is presented in Appendix 4. There is some degree of subjectivity in this process, but I felt that as a result of my experience working with parents and teachers, I was able to understand the context in which the responses were made and therefore understand their meaning.

Initially, the main topics used for coding the interview data were: literacy, family, culture and power. These headings were derived from the literature about the issues that might lead to differences in the beliefs and expectations of a parent's role in helping children's literacy development. As I went through the results it became clear that clusters of responses fitted into certain topics within these four, broad headings. As these clusters emerged I gave each of these clusters a name that emerged from an analysis of the comments in the cluster. It is easier, when presenting the results to have these topics identified. However, it quickly became apparent that the title of one main topic needed to

be changed. The interview comments that illustrated issues of power between teachers, parents and the educational system appeared in the form of comments about home/school links and the parents' and teachers' ability to promote useful connections rather than comments about institutional power. As a result, this main topic was renamed "Home/school links". Each of these sets of comments was then reviewed and reorganized into subtopics. The creation of these subtopics was an iterative process and some comments were categorized under more than one subtopic (see Appendix 3 for an illustration of this process).

The creation of main topics and subtopics enabled me to see which themes or ideas were occurring more often than others. An initial summary of the number of comments in each subtopic and the number of participants making the comments showed that there were some subtopics that contained only one comment, and others that contained up to 110 comments, and that some subtopics contained comments from several participants, while a few contained comments from only one participant. In order not to unduly emphasize subtopics in which there were few comments, or where only one or two participants in the study made those comments, subtopics that contained less than five comments, or less than three participants, were combined with larger subtopics. All the subtopics were then reviewed to check for consistency. Based on the four categories extracted from the literature, (literacy, family, culture and home/school links) the coding evolved into the following main topics and subtopics (Table 5).



I had expected the parents' and the teachers' beliefs about how parents can support children's literacy development to be similar in some respects and different in others and that, by emphasizing the similarities in their beliefs it would be possible to redesign the family literacy programs in the school in ways that built on this shared understanding. However, it became apparent during the interview process that the parents' beliefs about how they could help their children learn were different from the teachers' beliefs. It was also apparent that parents from different cultures held different beliefs about their roles in helping children learn. As I went through the interview data, it became apparent that there were different categories of beliefs in the parental role in developing children's literacy. While these categories were not entirely discreet I was able to categorize the different beliefs according to the predominant characteristics as self-reported by parents and teachers. The features that emerged from this analysis of the parent and teacher's discourse included: parents' and teachers' account of main focus of the parental role and their perceptions of family in helping children learn. Differences in beliefs about what constituted literacy and literacy learning, how children learn and who has the power to help them learn also guided the categorization of predominant beliefs about the parental roles in children's literacy development. In order to achieve inter-rater reliability trained researchers and the research supervisor co-analyzed the data and through discussion modified the emerging set of categories and resolved any differences of opinion.

More detailed descriptions of each of these four categories will be presented in Chapter 5.

Table 5

*Analysis of interview data: topics and sub-topics*

Main topic	Subtopics
Culture	Experiences of school (32/6)
	Language (44/12)
	Cultural issues (44/12)
Family	Concepts of the parental role in helping children learn (117/14)
	Parents' school experience (14/4)
	General comments about families (31/13)
Literacy	Concepts of literacy (69/16)
	Literacy development (36/13)
	Parental strategies (134/17)
	Concerns about strategies (41/8)
	Resources (24/12)
Home/school links	Parent participation in school (86/22)
	Parent participation in Family Literacy programs (29/6)
	Concerns about schooling in Canada (35/11)
	Home/school communication (92/18)
	Schools supporting parents (109/19)

The numbers in brackets after the topic indicate the number of comments in the topic and the number of participants who provided the comments. For example, under the main topic of home/school links the subtopic "Schools supporting parents" contains 109 comments provided by 19 participants. By looking at these numbers it was possible to determine which of the issues were considered to be the most important to the participants in the study.

#### **4. 6. 3. Presentation of results**

The first research question will be answered by analyzing the responses of teachers and parents to the interview questions: "What are the most important ways parents can help children's literacy development and why are they important?" The results will present the range of beliefs held by parents and teachers in this school.

The second research question will be answered by analyzing interview responses about the role of the school in supporting the parental role in helping children learn. The analysis will be linked to findings from the first research question. In this way, a comparison will be made between the teachers' and parents' beliefs and expectations. The amount and type of common understanding between teachers and parents will be addressed, and the data explored to uncover ways of increasing this common understanding relative to the family literacy programs in the school.

The third research question will be addressed by applying the analytical framework, described in question 2, to the existing school-based family literacy programs in order to

suggest ways they may be adapted to increase the amount of common understanding that exists between parents and teachers.

#### **4. 7. Research trustworthiness**

Case study research demands both accurate descriptions of the phenomena under examination and the search for alternative explanations that go beyond intuition. In order to minimize misrepresentations and misunderstandings certain protocols are necessary to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the data (Stake, 1995).

The imposition of a researcher into a situation automatically disrupts that situation and therefore distorts the data collection. The researcher must make every effort to minimize this disruption while ensuring that they obtain the data they need. By visiting the research site on many occasions over a prolonged period of time I became known and recognized by the teachers and parents and accepted as part of the school setting. My previous experience as a teacher in the school helped me understand the structure of the school day and how to minimize my impact on the running of the school. The length of time I spent in the school, combined with my previous knowledge of the school helped me understand the ambient culture, allowing me to check for misinformation, and build trust with the teachers and parents. The presence of recording equipment, either notebooks or electronic devices may also distort responses from participants. In order to limit this distortion I carefully explained to interviewees that I was recording their comments but would turn off the recording device any time they asked me to do so. Also,

I asked permission before making notes and showed my notebook to make it clear that the notes would not be attributed to individuals.

In order to ensure that my interpretation of what I observed or recorded was correct, I used member checking. During interviews with parents, I constantly asked them for clarification about my understanding by telling them what I thought I had heard and asking for their comments. Occasionally parents would correct my understandings but, more often, they would use my summary of their responses as a springboard for further comments. As part of the member-check I met with a group of teachers and presented my analysis of the data I had collected so far for their response. This procedure allowed me to determine the trustworthiness of my analysis and to obtain deeper insights into the issues under discussion.

One of the main ways trustworthiness of a case study is determined is by the use of triangulation (Stake, 1995). Triangulation is the need for more than one perspective in order to obtain an accurate picture of a phenomenon (Yin, 1994). Triangulation does not mean that all accounts of a situation will be the same but it is a strategy for developing a holistic understanding of a situation in order to construct a credible explanation of it.

Stake (1995) suggests four types of triangulation are required in case study research. Data source triangulation was achieved by the use of field notes, interview transcripts, students work and document analysis to find recurrent themes within the data. Investigator triangulation was achieved by discussing the situation with another researcher who knew

the school and its philosophy, as well as by discussing the data, including inter-rater reliability checks and the creation of recurrent themes with other researchers. Theory triangulation was achieved by discussing the results with educators and researchers holding different beliefs about the nature of education and the roles of parents and teachers within the educational system. This theory triangulation came partly from the responses of the participants themselves. Methodological triangulation requires multiple approaches within a single study. In this study data was collected through interview, document collection, observation and a group discussion. A fifth form of triangulation not mentioned by Stake is participant triangulation where different types of participants are approached for their perspective on the same issue. In this study this was achieved by meeting with teachers, administrators, support workers, parents, and educational consultants.

In qualitative research care must be taken to avoid subjectivity in the analysis of the data. While total objectivity can ever be achieved, care was taken to minimize any subjective judgment being introduced into the process of analysis. Data analysis was carried out within a framework derived from the literature and utilized a software program that facilitated the analysis of interview comments within the chosen categories. This analytic approach allowed for the development of connections and ideas in a way that provided possible explanations of the event in question. Yin (1994) stated that case study research does not represent a representative sample, and that the aim is not to provide statistical generalizations to a wider population, but to analyze an event in some way. External validity relates to whether the findings of a study are generalizable beyond the immediate

case. When using case study methodology, the researcher is trying to reconcile a particular set of results with a broader theory. If similar findings or conclusions are derived from similar situations, they may become more generalizable.

#### **4. 8. Summary**

In this chapter, the methodological issues relevant to the study have been discussed and a case study approach was deemed to be suitable to the research situation. Details were given about the methodology used, the participants chosen, and how the data were collected and analyzed. This chapter also indicated some of the difficulties I faced while conducting the research and the efforts that were taken to ensure the validity of the results.

The chapter contained a description of how the analytic software, Nvivo™, allowed me to categorize the interview comments and analyze relationships between people, processes and concepts. It also illustrated how coding the research data was an ongoing process based on iterative understandings of the data. The chapter concluded with a discussion of how I had tried to ensure trustworthiness of the research.

## **CHAPTER 5: BELIEFS ABOUT THE PARENTAL ROLE IN CHILDREN'S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT.**

"We do have assumptions that we share similar understandings and we don't really"  
(Education Consultant for Multiracial Education).

### **5. 1. Introduction**

This chapter addresses the first research question: "What beliefs and expectations do parents and teachers hold about a parent's role in children's early literacy development?"

To elicit this information, as main prompts parents were asked: "What do you consider to be the most important ways you can help your child learn to read and write and why do you consider these ways to be important?" and teachers were asked as prompts: "What do you consider are the most important ways parents can help their children develop literacy skills and why do you consider them to be important?"

Responses from teachers and parents to these questions revealed that there was a range of beliefs and expectations about how parents can help their children's literacy development. Also, it became apparent that parents and teachers held four distinct, yet overlapping, beliefs about the parental role in children's literacy development. An analysis of the beliefs was conducted as described in Chapter 4, and the following categories emerged: parent beliefs in their role as "Carer"; parent beliefs in their role as "Developer"; parent beliefs in their role as "Supporter"; and parent beliefs in their role as "Nurturer". The responses of the parents who participated in this study indicate that, for the most part, they believe their role in children's literacy development was that of Carer,



Supporter or Developer. The responses of the teachers, who participated in this study, indicated that they, for the most part, believed the parents' role in children's literacy development should be as Nurturers. Within each of these four roles there were distinct beliefs about the role of the family, what constituted literacy and literacy learning and how children are supported in their learning.

Within the four categories of parental role, it is interesting to note that the primary belief in the parental role as that of Carer was predominantly held by parents who were non-English speaking, that of Supporter by parents for whom English was a second language and the roles of Developer and Nurturer held by parents and teachers who were English speaking and who had been educated in Canada. It is hardly surprising that this form of categorization occurred, as comments from both parents and teachers indicated that their beliefs were based on their experiences of the educational system in which they were taught, the involvement of parents in their own education and, in the case of teachers, their training and knowledge of research.

In the next part of this chapter each of the four categories will be described with reference to sets of underlying beliefs about: a) the role of the family; b) their concepts of literacy; c) beliefs about how children learn; and d) issues of agency - who has the power to help children learn.

## **5. 2. Parental belief in their role as Carer**

Parents in this category believe that their role in helping their children learn is as that of providing their children with the necessities of life. They help their children's literacy development by providing their children with a safe environment and they expect their children to complete their homework and learn the work set by the school. The beliefs of these parents are school-centered: they believe that it is the role of the school to provide their children with a good education and their role is to make sure that their children take full advantage of the educational opportunities that are available in the school. All the nine non-English speaking parents believed that their role in helping their children's literacy development was primarily as that of a Carer.

It is necessary to review how the multicultural worker translated the responses of these parents. She either translated their comments directly or made a comment about what the parents had said. (In reporting on the comments made by these parents the translated views of individual parents is indicated by using the code for that parent, for example P9V, and the comments made on the responses of several parents by the code PV).

### **5. 2. 1. The role of the family**

Those parents who believe their primary role in helping their children's literacy development is that of a Carer believe that it is the role of the school to teach their children. This belief is based partly on their previous educational experiences in Vietnam and China, where, as the multicultural workers explained, it was the school's role to teach

and the parents' role to ensure that children learned. A multicultural worker, describing the Vietnamese educational system that the parents most likely experienced, stated that:

The parents don't take the responsibility to teach the children, the children have the responsibility to ask the parents, because if they don't do the homework they might get spanked, they might get the zero mark, they might get different kinds of things they don't like because that goes into the report card, and then the report card comes home monthly, every month. And then we don't do A, B, C [on report cards]. For example, in a class of forty students we are placed from the first to the fortieth. (SS1)

The multicultural workers explained that the parents' belief in their role as that of a Carer stems from their understanding that, "It is the responsibility of the education system to educate children," (SS2) and that, "[Parents] rely totally on the teachers to teach their children." (SS1) As the Vietnamese multicultural worker rationalized, "The parents [do not accept] responsibility to teach the children [because] the children have (sic) the responsibility to [learn by] do[ing] the homework." (SS1) She also noted that parental involvement in a child's learning is not seen as important as, "[Parents] don't help [young children] in Vietnam because, when they start school, they are given something [from school] to study at home." (SS1)

Speaking from her experience as a parent, the multicultural worker explained that parents are only invited into schools in Vietnam when children are in trouble or are not completing their homework. She explained, "I have to sign the paper whenever he doesn't do his homework ... I get called by the teacher [if this happens too often]." (SS1) The multicultural worker explained that in Vietnam the teachers have power over the parents:

The teacher tells us what is expected of the child, and of the parent, every day... and if the homework hasn't been done three times the child has to stay at school to do the work ... and when you come to pick up your child you have to sit around and wait...and you don't want that to happen... so you make sure your child does his homework! (SS1)

The multicultural worker further explained that it was not only because of children's behavior that parents are not invited into the schools. As she noted, "Parents are not welcome in schools in Vietnam ... they [the teachers] are not friendly... you are not invited to get involved in the school." (SS1)

The belief of these parents that it is the role of teachers to educate their children does not mean that the parents consider that they have no role to play in helping their children learn. These parents believe in creating the environment in which a child can complete the work set by the school. According to the multicultural worker, these parents do this by, "Making learning at home a routine, a habit" (SS1), and she commented that, "Just reminding their children to do their homework" (SS1) was probably the way these parents they could best support their children's learning. She described one Vietnamese parent as a good parent because, whenever he was working away from home, he would call home to remind his children to do their homework.

These parents who believe that their role is that of Carer also provide extra support for their children's learning. They appeared very concerned that their children were achieving the goals set by the school, and if a parent learned that a child was having learning difficulties, they might, as one parent stated, "Remind them to work harder, or send them to a tutor." (P5V) In fact, these parents saw tutoring as important as school

learning in helping their children learn. The Vietnamese multicultural worker explained how students in Vietnam were often sent to tutors as a means of reaching the standards set by their school, and that these tutors may, in fact, be children's classroom teacher working in an out-of-school context as an extra way to earn money.

The parents whose beliefs about helping their children's literacy development belonged predominantly to the category called Carer also believed that they supported their children's education by providing for them financially. The multicultural worker explained how she, "Had to work hard sending money over there [for her son's schooling]"(SS1), and the other multicultural worker suggested that, "Many parents would help their children learn, but it is lack of time ... they work hard to send money to their families back home."(SS2)

For parents who believed in being Carers, the role of the teachers and of the parents were seen as separate, with parents having little say in how their children are taught in school. These parents expected to be told exactly what to do, when they visited the school. The multicultural worker explained, "Parents want things to do when they come to school, not just to sit around and chat." (SS1) She also explained that if the parents are not told how the school will hold them responsible for their children's learning, these parents think that the school does not think that they can help their children learn. She explained that this leads to parents feeling that they are not expected to help their children learn and that: "In this system parents get the easy way [not being held accountable] ... they are not asked to do it!"(SS1)

Two of the Vietnamese parents, a married couple, appeared to be changing their beliefs respecting how children learned. They had come to understand that the Canadian system of education produced, as the father said, "Doctors and engineers"(P13V), and that therefore, the educational system must be good, despite it being incomprehensible to them. Both these parents felt that they needed to adapt their role so as to be able to fit in more with the educational system in Canada, and they had allowed their daughter to go to the library to choose her own books, something she would not be allowed to do in Vietnam. As the mother reported, "Her dad says that we have to respect her [choice of books] because [in this country] she has the freedom to do, and think whatever she thinks, if it is not unreasonable." (P13V) Both the mother and the father felt that, "It is a must (sic) to follow the way out here ... we just follow," but that, "It is very difficult to help [their children]," (P9V) because they do not understand the educational system.

All of the parents, who saw their role as that of Carer, are immigrants to Canada, and their orientation to child rearing may differ from that of parents who have been brought up in Canada. Many of the parents who are Carers were trying to establish themselves in Canada by working at more than one job. The multicultural worker explained how their work situation, and orientation to child rearing, impacted parent/child relationships. She explained:

At home many families don't eat together, the children eat food throughout the evening and the parents eat on their own at different times. They don't think about having dinner together so they can talk. Or they don't realize that sometimes they should just try to talk to the child, not to say 'I told you so' or, 'You shouldn't do that,' before they finish listening to the child. They assume too much, and that doesn't give the child the

opportunity to express, or tell you, why the child does whatever he or she does. They assume they know what is going on, so they tell the child, 'Don't do this,' and that keeps the child quiet. (SS1)

However, despite difficulties with parent/child communication, comments from mothers who were attending the Mother Goose drop-in program at the school indicated that family members were involved in children's learning, often in ways that they had learned in the program. In this group of parents mothers appear to be the main source of learning support for a child. As a translator commented about the mother of a preschool child, "[The] mum reads books with the children, alphabet books and shape books." (P5C)

Fathers were called on when they have the required skills, as one parent stated, "The father [reads the home reading books] because he can read English." (P1C) Other family members are also involved, "Sometimes I read and I ask sister or brother to read to them." (P4C) Another parent explained their home practices in this way: "Uncle is always holding her and playing with her on the computer." (P2C) For several families, it was the grandparent that took a major role in supporting children's learning, as a parent reported, "Grandma bought a book for her... she is teaching her the songs she learns in the program." (P1C) However, there is an understanding that this arrangement might not be the best way to help young children learn, as this parent mentioned that, "My mother is over 80, so it is not good." (P1C) A multicultural worker, recalling her own childhood, explained how, in busy families, children often support each other's learning: "We listen to stories from our friends, we tell each other stories, scary stories." (SS1)

### 5. 2. 2. Concept of literacy

Parents, who believe in being Carers, appeared to see children's literacy development as a set of skills to be learned. According to one of the multicultural workers, in Vietnam there is an emphasis on the acquisition of grammar as a means of becoming literate. She explained that in school, there is "A lot of repetition, every day the same thing, the tenses, analyzing, those things every day, the grammar." (SS1) She continued to explain that the North American approach to literacy by analyzing stories and predicting what might happen in them was not valued highly and in schools in Vietnam. "We don't go into the literature, we go into the language." (SS1) This multicultural worker saw the Vietnamese children's lack of understanding of English language construction and vocabulary as the main reason why bright Vietnamese children did not do well in Canadian schools. Based on many years of working with children and families, she suggested that, "They are smart, but they cannot do well in academic subjects because they don't know the grammar." (SS1), and, "There are so many words they don't understand because it is not repeated, it is not done again at home." (SS1)

These parents' belief that reading is a set of skills may lead to confusion and misunderstanding between parents and the school system. Based on her experience of working with parents, a multicultural worker explained how these parents' concept of literacy created difficulties in understanding children's learning difficulties:

When you tell ... parents that your child is not reading according to her level (they will say) she can read very well, she can read the whole story and decode and spell very well and whatever.... I say, yes, she is able to decode and read the words, but if you ask her questions about what she has read, will she be able to answer the questions, [questions] like who or why or what happened? I tell them, we measure a child's ability not by



how well she can read the words, but by how well she understands what she has read, and this is quite a common problem with kids coming from the Philippines, because our alphabet is almost the same, so the sounds are the same, so kids are very good at decoding. But when it comes to comprehension, it is not there. A lot of parents do not really understand this, because they think she can read ... so we have lots of kids who are coming to high school who still have a comprehension level of grade three or four. (SS2)

She described how preschool children may be, “Taught the letter names, not the sounds” (SS2), an approach to helping children’s literacy development that was reinforced by the comment of one parent attending a pre-school family literacy program, when she shared how she helped children her child learn to practice writing by “Copying from a reading book ... I give her two lines to copy.”(P1C)

A few of these parents who had preschool aged children, and who were attending the preschool drop in program, understood the benefits of reading with their children in their heritage language. One person reported, “We read Chinese books, we get them from the library, and my friends go to China and bring simple books back” (P1C), and two parents of preschool aged children mentioned that they liked it when children brought dual language books home from school, as this allowed them to read to their children in their own language. However, as a multicultural worker explained, “Reading to children, parents try it, but it is not something we are used to, nobody read to me”(SS2), and another worker commented that, “It is not common practice [in Vietnam] that [parents] take a book and they sit with their children on their lap and read to them.” (SS1) Some parents even have difficulty following the advice the schools offer, as a multicultural worker noted, “A lot of the parents are asked to read to their children, but they don’t like

to do it.” (SS1) This may be, in part, because as she reported, “[Parents in Vietnam] don’t have access to books, there is no public library.” (SS1) There may also be another reason why parents are reluctant to read to their children, as one frustrated parent from this category of parents commented: “I read to him, and then he says, ‘No, no, it is not the correct pronunciation’, so then he reads and I follow.” (P1C)

For parents who believe that their role should be that of a Carer, talking to a child is not seen as a way to help their children’s literacy development. A multicultural worker explained that, “We don’t read to the children at night, and parents don’t usually talk to the children very much, the mothers are busy.” (SS1) She gave an amusing account of her understanding of an application of the type of verbal interaction suggested by teachers when she described how this verbal interaction might play out:

What is the point of taking the child to the park and to sit there and to say ‘Oh do you know what they are? They are leaves. Why are they yellow? Oh, because it is fall.’ We don’t do it, it is kids talk and parents don’t do kids talk. My parents didn’t do it [with] me that way, and I don’t do it with my son. (SS1)

While these parents may not appreciate that talking to children supports literacy learning, they place great emphasis on their children learning English. Parents in the preschool drop-in program commented that one of the main reasons they brought their children to the program was to have their young children exposed to and learning English. One parent also felt that participation in this program would help her English language skills and she reported that, “Everybody say (sic) if you want to learn English follow the little kids.”(P1C)

### 5. 2. 3. How children learn

Parents whose beliefs were those of a Carer tended to believe that children learn by hard work and practice. As one mother explained, "In my country we learn and learn and try to stuff everything into the child, and we study day and night ... over here it seems [that] everything is easy." (P1C) She expressed appreciation that, "The program here is taught much faster than in Vietnam, and the school day is much longer," and that, "[Children] learn faster here, and in a more comprehensive way." (P1C) The multicultural worker explained that parents do have concerns about how schools appear to be run, and were anxious about the apparent lack of discipline they see in classrooms. She stated that, "Sometimes the children are playful ... [parents] are worried that the teacher is not strict enough, they want them to be stricter." (SS1) Parents who see their role as that of a Carer seemed to relate apparent lack of discipline in a classroom with a lack of learning. These parents may be unable to recognize the unstructured learning that takes place in classrooms. The multicultural worker suggested that parents expected the teachers to discipline their children, and that they even supported a style of discipline that would not be allowed in Canadian schools. She reported that, "If [the teachers] like to spank them, if they like to discipline them in some way, just go ahead, we really appreciate that, to help them become good citizens." (SS1) In accounting for these parental values, the multicultural worker explained how, in Vietnam, there is a strong emphasis on developing citizenship awareness in schoolchildren. When describing how schools in Vietnam encourage these skills, she stated, "We have to learn how to be a good citizen, to respect the elders, to take responsibilities... in social studies" (SS1), and proceeded to acknowledge that,

“[Parents] want [their children] to keep some of their values, religion and morals, and they desire them to grow up as good citizens.” (SS2) It appears that parents who believe in being Carers are concerned that, if schools in Canada do not teach their children suitable values, their children are not going to grow up knowing how to be good citizens. The question that arises is, if neither parents nor teachers see this as part of their role, where are children getting this important lesson?

The Vietnamese multicultural worker explained that Vietnamese parents measure their children's learning by their ability to, “Recite back what they have learned by heart.” (SS1) It appears that Chinese parents think the same way, as one parent expressed concern that, “[Children] don't remember [what they are taught], especially the little ones.”(P1C) The same worker explained that parents, who consider their role to be that of a Carer, consider learning to be a serious business and as she reported, these parents expect children to spend, “A whole block of time in the evening, doing homework and studying” (SS1), and that, according to many parents, young children are not learning anything in school because, “They just play [in kindergarten], they don't learn anything, they just play.” (SS1) The children of parents who believe in the Carer role are encouraged to work hard in order to get their names on an honor roll, and their parents expect them to achieve this valued status by attending to homework tasks, task that they expect to be carefully marked and corrected by the teacher. These parents are concerned when they do not see homework being marked, as the multicultural worker explained, “How will the child know what is right or wrong? How will they learn?”(SS1) It appears that homework also plays a role in determining family life, the multicultural worker

suggested, “Yes, [parents] would like homework instead of [children] watching TV or playing all the time,” and indicated that, in her experience, homework was an important way to learn, “[My] teacher said I didn’t work to my capabilities because I never looked into my homework.”(SS1) The multicultural worker also mentioned that children and teachers in Vietnam do not interact in the classroom, “Unless the teacher is listening to your work or questioning the work.” (SS1)

#### **5. 2. 4. Issues of agency – who has the power to help children learn**

For parents who believe in being Carers, the power to teach children resides mainly with the teachers, and parents feel that they had limited power to support their children’s learning. This is partly because of their difficulty in understanding the English language. As one Vietnamese-speaking parent explained, “Many times we have a meeting ... we don’t know the language, so we rely totally on the teachers to teach our children.”(P13v) One English-speaking parent expressed her concern for these parents when she said, “I can’t even imagine how they meet the challenge [of helping their children] if their language is not English!”(P18E) These parents believe that the most important way they can help their children learn is by providing their children with extra help when they are behind in their work. They rely on the teachers to tell them when their children are having difficulties in school. As one parent reported, “I have asked the teacher to let me know if he is behind, and if there is a problem.”(P9v) One parent, whose beliefs were could be categorized as belonging to the Carer group, understood that he had a role to play in helping his child learn and that he was willing to obtain a tutor. He commented, “As parents, we take part of the responsibility [of helping our children learn] because we

cannot rely on the teacher all the time, we have to help them if they get behind.” (P13V)

However, there were major barriers for these parents when they tried to provide the help their children needed. The first barrier was one that related to all parents in the study: the way the parents try to help their children learn may not be the same as the way their children were being taught in class. As one mother, whose beliefs were those of a Carer but who had come to have some of the beliefs of parents as Supporter, reported, “I taught her [math] the way I learned in Vietnam, and [my daughter] said, ‘No, my teacher taught me a different way.’ (P9V) Parents with limited facility in English face the added barrier that their children’s work is in a language they do not understand. As one mother explained, “I try to help [my children] but I do not know the language... the language is the hardest, we don’t know anything,” (P1V) a comment that many of the parents in the group appeared to agree with. This lack of proficiency in English created problems for parents. As a multicultural worker explained, “The parents are ashamed because they cannot help [their children],”(SS1) and this problem may have been made worse by the children themselves because, as one mother explained, “[the child] is embarrassed that she [the mother] doesn’t speak English and she is not Canadian, he is,” (P21ESL) and as a result this child had forbidden his mother to enter school and she had been told, by him, to meet him outside in the playground.

Parents who believe in being Carers may not see the link between their use of their own language and their child’s literacy development. These parents may read to children in their first language as a way of ensuring that their children retain some facility with this language rather than understanding how this can contribute to a child’s literacy

development. As one parent commented, “We try to read to them in Vietnamese in order for them not to forget the language.”(P9v)

For parents whose beliefs are those of a Carer the teacher is the person who has the responsibility and the ability to help their children learn and they have a supportive but passive role to play. Their ability to be agents of learning for their children is severely limited by language constraints and cultural issues.

#### **5. 2. 5. Parental belief in their role as Carer: Summary**

Those parents who believed that the main parental role in helping children learn was that of Carer tried to ensure that they do everything they can to follow the dictates of the school. They encouraged their children to complete their schoolwork by providing, as a multicultural worker reported, “A whole block of time, every evening, doing homework and studying.”(SS1) Some of these parents may did this even when they could not help their children do their homework because they did not understand English. One parent explained that, even though she did not understand what work her child was expected to do, she encouraged her child to do the work by sitting with her while she was doing her homework.

These parents saw literacy learning in terms of language development and grammar acquisition and believed that children learn by repetition and practice. They believe that the use of extrinsic rewards motivated children to learn. Parents who are Carers believe

that teachers set the learning agenda for their children, and that the teachers need to hold the parents accountable for ensuring that children do their schoolwork.

The beliefs of these parents appear to have been formed by their experience with an educational system in a different country, but parents in Canada, who embrace traditional teaching and learning styles, may also hold these beliefs.

### **5. 3. Parental belief in their role as Supporter**

Parents, who believe that their role is that of a Supporter of children's learning, focus on helping their children master what they consider to be the school curriculum. These parents are concerned with ensuring that their children understand what is taught in the classroom and try to supplement, and review, this work with their children. They view their children's ability to understand the school curriculum as a measurement of how well their children are learning. These parents are only able to fulfill this role if they have an understanding of English, the language of the curriculum.

#### **5. 3. 1. The role of the family**

Many of the parents whose beliefs in developing their children's literacy are those of a Supporter are immigrants to Canada and were taught in traditional schools in their home country. Their experience of learning included strict teachers, lack of parental involvement in school, and plenty of homework. As one parent explained, "The work [in my school] was very structured." (P22ESL) Their experiences were not unlike those of the parents who believe in being Carers. All the parents in this group were able to communicate in English, leading to the possibility that it might be their facility in



English, and therefore their ability to communicate with teachers, that had helped them develop their beliefs.

Parents, who believe in being Supporters, understand the importance of their role in helping children learn, as one parent made clear when she said, "If the kids don't get help at home they are going to get lost in the system ... parents take the responsibility," and she demonstrated that she felt she had a role to play in helping her child learn when she said, "You help your kids, my job is to do it." (P22ESL) However, these parents also believe that, as the same mother stated, "[Parents] can't take the role of the teacher", and that, "Home help is very important, when the teacher teaches them something if they don't know how to do it, they will be lost, if they practice at home they will get it." (P23ESL)

Parents who are Supporters believe that their role is to help their children practice what is taught in school by emulating the work of the school. This implies that these parents need to know what their children are learning. One parent expressed her need to know what her child was doing in class when she stated, "I keep track of what she is doing at school.... we try to work on that". The same parent also expressed her belief in communication with her child's teacher when she said, "I like ... keeping informed so you know what your child is doing and that is something you can do at home." (P22ESL)

Parents, who are Supporters, appear to understand that there may be limitations to what the school can offer their child. As one parent expressed, "The school can't do

everything, and you can provide [your child] what the school can't provide." (P22ESL)

This parent described how she tried to provide what she thought was missing in school, "I put on [salsa] music for her at home, I know the teacher won't give her this, at home music is huge, so I try to give her what I know she won't get there." (P22ESL) Parents who are Supporters seem to accept that the limitations of the classroom require them to help their children learn. As one parent explained, "I know that there is [one] teacher with lots of students, and [the teachers] do their best, but I have to be at home [to help my child]"(P22ESL), and, in realizing the limitations of the school, these parents wanted to ensure that they filled in any gaps in learning that their children might have been experiencing.

Parents who believe in being Supporters consider that an important part of their role is to provide resources for their children, resources that can be used in the home in order to review the work that has taken place in the classroom. These parents try to provide their children with workbooks to use at home. One mother, pulling out of a bag several workbooks for young children, explained that, "I go to the store and buy workbooks, we have a whole bunch of books and we practice on them." (P23ESL) She continued, "Whatever is in the curriculum, we will go and buy it." (P23ESL) She explained how this would help her help her child learn when she said, "If there was one textbook, and they were going to work on it, I don't think parents would mind spending thirty or forty dollars on it." (P23ESL)

The importance of providing resources for their children was demonstrated by the parents' commitment to get the books they think they need in order to help their children learn. One mother explained how she used family connections to get the books she wanted, "I have some books in Spanish my family sent," (P22ESL) and another mother, describing how she felt she could only get books in her country of origin, said, "I got books from back home because I couldn't find any books here, small alphabet books." (P23ESL) One parent explained how providing help for children was relatively easy in her country of origin, she stated that, "You can get a tutor, you can get a tutor for each subject," (P23ESL) but she also understood the value of the resources available in Canada when she commented that, "the projects they do at home ... we go to the library and get a book and read about something." (P23ESL)

Parents who develop children's literacy by being Supporters are often aware of the amount of work they needed to do in order to help their children learn. As one parent put it, "I feel that I am doing a lot ... but maybe I just need to work a little harder," (P14ESL) and these parents understand that they might need to sacrifice other things in order to help their children learn. One parent commented:

You can find time [to help your child]... you can cut down on your job maybe work part time, if you really put your mind to it you can do it. Most of the time you can manage it, you need to work on it. (P23ESL)

These parents, who believe that their role is to support the work of the school, may designate one parent as the main person to help children with their work. One mother, who had tried to share this role with her husband, commented on the confusion this caused her son when she said, "My husband tried to teach my son and he said 'Dad, no,

you don't know how to teach me!" (P23ESL) This comment is similar to that of the Carer parent who stated that because the father could read English he was the one who helped with homework. This illustrates how the different parental beliefs overlap between categories.

Parents who believe in being Supporters may want their children to retain their culture and language, while at the same time engaging fully in the mainstream culture. One mother reported that, "My children don't know how to read and write [my first language] but we are working on that!" (P23ESL) Another parent described how she used the home reading books from the classroom as a way of encouraging her young child to practice her first language, "One day she brought this book that was really easy for her (to read) ... so I said 'Let's do it in Spanish' so she tried to translate it into Spanish, so we are reading and she is translating." (P22ESL) These parents have an understanding that their children are developing English language skills that they do not have, and this often causes them difficulties. One parent explained how her daughter had, "Become really critical of [me] because of my English ... you feel so intimidated, you stop talking." (P22ESL)

These parents may also be willing, in certain circumstances, to accept their children as teachers. One mother in this category was sending her child to Saturday classes to learn Arabic so that her child would be able to read and learn the Koran. This mother did not speak Arabic and was encouraging her daughter to teach her.

### 5. 3. 2. Concepts of literacy

Parents whose beliefs are those of a Supporter, view literacy and literacy learning in two ways, as a set of skills and as a social practice. These parents try to help their children master what they understand to be the skills of literacy by providing their children with opportunities for drill and practice. As a mother explained, "She has been practicing her printing and her numbers." (P3E) Another mother, describing how she helped her child with decoding words, explained that, "I get a book and we sound it out, sometimes the sounds do not work, so, what he has to do is look at the word and look at the word and then he gets it." (P23ESL) The emphasis was not always on skills of decoding, this mother stated that, "Sometimes I would get spellings for my son, and then we know we had to learn them," (P23ESL) and that it was important for a child to learn about letters. She described how in her school, "They would have big posters on the wall with all the sounds, and you would have it so drilled into you ... learning your ABC's." (P14ESL) But these parents understood that becoming literate required more than learning the names and sounds of the letter and that children's literacy developed by other means. One mother stated that her son "Would write [in his] journal every day ... just write ideas, this way his writing gets better and spelling gets better, and he starts thinking." (P23ESL) For some parents the concept of literacy learning is rooted in cultural traditions, as one mother commented, "I am Muslim, so [my daughter] is learning Arabic, she is learning Arabic so she can read the holy book, the Koran." (P21ESL)

Parents in this group tend to view literacy as facility with text but there is some acknowledgement that literacy resides in the way a person uses it.

### 5. 3. 3. How children learn

Parents who believe in being Supporters, expected to see the teachers exercising authority over their students and the students demonstrating respect for their teachers. These parents were concerned about what they saw as a lack of authority in the classrooms. As one parent explained, “The teachers try their best but ... there is no authority.” (P23ESL) This parent was worried because it appeared to her that, “Teachers do not have much authority over the kids, kids do whatever they want to do. (P23ESL) Parents who were Supporters did not expect the school to train children ways of behaving in the wider world and these parents took this responsibility onto themselves, as one parent stated, “I set [my child’s] values.”(P22ESL)

Parents who are Supporters expected teachers to provide their children with what they understood as the basic skills of literacy. One parent explained that a child’s understanding of basic concepts is a crucial factor in their ability to learn when she said, “Kids need the basics, or it is all going to go over their head.”(P23ESL) These parents also understood the need for a child’s learning, “to be fun and not too boring,”(P23ESL) while at the same time they stressed that children learn by practicing what they have been taught. Describing how she helped her child learn, one parent said, “You keep on repeating, practicing, practicing, practicing ... kids need to practice a lot, they really do.”(P23ESL)

In order to provide time and space in which to help their children practice, parents who are Supporters may create a structured environment in the home. One parent described how, at home, "We sit down, we get the books and we learn every day ... we do math, we do English, we do writing and reading, we do everything." (P23ESL) Parents may try to use different spaces within the home in which to work with children, as this parent demonstrated when she said, "We have got a dining table where we sit and study, we tried reading in the bedroom but it didn't work out." (P23ESL)

Parents who are Supporters appeared to be very concerned about lack of homework for their children and this seemed to be related to their experience of schooling. One parent reflected the thoughts of many when she stated that, "I remember [having to do] lots of [homework], and believe me, I was worried at the beginning... I was worried about the lack of homework [for my daughter],"(P22ESL) and explained that she had difficulty adjusting to her daughter not getting homework. As she explained, "It is really hard to break, this feeling that I had homework and she doesn't." (P22ESL) It is notable that her child was still in kindergarten at the time.

For parents who are Supporters, children playing does not equate to children learning, so kindergarten was seen, as one mother explained, "Just an extra playtime for the kids, and that they didn't actually learn anything, other than socializing with other kids in their age group." (P14ESL) A multicultural worker explained how, "According to many parents, [children] just go to [kindergarten] to play ... they don't learn anything, they just play all day." (SS1) It appears that these parents do not understand the amount of learning that

takes place when their children play, and though they want their children to learn how to be sociable, they do not equate this with learning.

#### **5. 3. 4. Issues of Agency – who helps children learn?**

Parents who believe in being Supporters of children's learning have come from backgrounds where the educational system has afforded them few chances to help their children learn. As one parent reported, "Parents [only] came for sports day, and [teachers] tell (sic) them what they need to know about their children, a few might ask questions, but mostly the teachers did the talking." (P20ESL) When she entered school for the first time, this parent explained, "Parents left us at the door, they were not allowed in to help us." (P20ESL) However these parents appeared to be more involved in their own children's education than their parents were allowed to be in theirs. They appear to be less afraid of the system in Canada and, as a result, were prepared to become involved with their child's teacher.

Although these parents saw the importance of the teacher's role in helping their children learn, they accepted that they too had a part to play in their children's learning process, as one parent made clear when she said, "[Learning] starts at school, to me it is the school ... once they get it, you need to teach them how to practice." (P23ESL) These parents accepted that the teachers had received training in teaching and therefore possessed skills they did not have. A parent demonstrated this awareness when she said, "I am not a teacher, they know what they are doing, they have degrees and stuff." (P23ESL) As a result of this awareness that teachers know more about helping children learn than they



do, parents who believe in being Supporters look to the school to provide them with information they need to help their children learn. For one parent, information about what her child was doing in class was the starting point for her work with her child. She stated that, "When they started learning it at school, then I knew it was time to practice."  
(P23ESL)

Many of these parents were able to communicate in English, even though it was not their first language. However, it was apparent that they understood the importance of helping their children keep, or learn, their first language. One parent, when asked about language use in the home, stated that, "My kids speak Punjabi, they don't know how to read it and write it yet, but we are working on it!" (P23ESL) Parents with English as a second language want their children to have every opportunity to learn English. However, when their children's proficiency in English exceeds that of their own, this can lead to difficulties in the family. As one parent explained, "[My daughter] spoke Spanish to me before [she started] school, and now she talks in English, it is hard for me, but her life happens in English." (P22ESL)

Although these parents did not expect the school to teach their children how to be good citizens, they did expect the school to demonstrate some of the values that they believed were necessary to make a good citizen. In particular, they expected their children to show respect to authority and were concerned when they did not see this happening. One parent noted the differences between the classroom culture of her home country and that

of her child's, when she commented, "Parents at home, they have full rights, it is a matter of mutual respect, the culture here is completely different." (P23ESL)

#### **5. 3. 5. Parental beliefs in their role as Supporter: Summary**

Parents whose beliefs are those of a Supporter considered that the parental role in helping children learn is to develop and review the work that is taking place in school. They supported their children's learning by creating a structured environment and providing learning resources, including workbooks and textbooks, that reviewed and supplemented what they perceived to be the curriculum of the school. Literacy learning was understood to be skill-based, with some recognition that literacy learning might be embedded in social activities. They understood that the power to help children learn resided in the teachers' presentation of the curriculum and the skill they demonstrated when they present it.

#### **5. 4. Parental beliefs in their role as Developer**

Parents whose beliefs are those of a Developer view their role in supporting children's learning in a more personal way. They appear to be concerned with how the needs of their specific children could be accommodated within the school system, and how they can act as advocates for their children. Their focus is on how their individual children learn and what they can do to help. Two parents expressed the kind of relationship they expected to have with the school when they described their role as "Part of a child's voyage in the education system," (P16E) and as, "A marriage, for sure." (P25E)

#### **5. 4. 1. The role of the family**

For parents who believe in being Developers, family involvement in children's learning is based on providing the kind of encouragement that helps the child develop intrinsic motivation. As one parent stated, "You have to look at what motivates children ...you cannot make children do anything, they will not let you control them, so you need to motivate them." (P25E) However, one parent was more prepared to rely on extrinsic motivation, and she described how, "We bribe our children to read, I think a reward system can be quite useful." (P15E)

As well as providing encouragement for their children to learn, parents who are Developers also engage their children in school-like activities. As one parent explained, "We have little spelling bees, or math bees, or counting money, or just all kinds of things." (P19E) These parents understand learning to be an enjoyable activity and try to pass this sense of fun on to their children: One parent explained, "We did what we thought was appropriate, what we thought was fun with our daughter." (P24E)

Parents who believe in being Developers are concerned with how their child learn and would like to see the teachers being able to meet the individual needs of every child in the class. They understand that their child is one of a number of children in the class and fear that their child may not be getting the individual attention they think he or she needs. One parent commented on the difference between the levels of personal attention the child received before and after entering school, and the type of information she needed from the school when she said:

As a preschool parent you are so involved with your child ... so school seems kind of deflating because your child is only one out of thirty and [he] is not getting the attention ... and [I need] more information about what his strengths are. (P17E)

It is interesting to note how parents who were Developers come to understand their role in helping their children learn. For some, their own parents had acted as role models. As the father of one child explained, "We knew that reading to her was important because our parents both read to us." (P24E) Other parents had come to an understanding of their role from the community. As one mother described it, "Every parent hears how important it is to read to your child from the moment they are born." (P24E) Three of the parents who were Developers had studied education in some way. Two of these parents were trained as teachers of preschool children, and one was trained as a teacher of English as a second language. They all referred to this training as a formative experience in how they came to their beliefs about helping their children's literacy development. Those parents from this category, who were unsure that they were helping their children in the best way possible, tried to obtain information from the community at large. As one parent explained, "You look for anyone around you who seems to know what they are doing ... and ask them a million questions," (P17E), or more locally, as in the case of one mother who stated, "My mother-in-law is a Special Education Assistant so she was big on the phonics, I wasn't sure [about this approach] but she said it really works." (P17E) This acceptance, that others know more about how to help children learn than they do, lead to parents engaging in school-like learning activities in the home. Parents spoke of using early reading books, wondering about the reading level of their children, and practicing spelling. These parents also expressed their fears about not knowing enough about how to

help their children learn, and their concern about the consequences of getting it wrong.

One parent described how she taught her children to read using 'old fashioned' Janet and John books, and how concerned she was when her child's teacher had explained that they did not use that method any more. Several parents agreed with one parent when she stated, "[Parents] are damned if we do, and damned if we don't." (P15E) The same parents expressed concern that what they are doing with their children now may affect them later, as one parent exclaimed, "Until they are 25 years old!" (P17E)

Parents who believe that their role in their children's literacy development is that of a Developer need information about how their children learn and how to understand their progress. Knowledge of their children's developmental levels appears to be of great importance to them even though this knowledge may be a two-edged sword. Several parents reported that they experienced peer pressure over both their children's academic achievements and the type of school in which they decided to place them. It seemed that there was competition between parents who wanted, as one mother disparagingly put it, "to brag about 'My kid can read!'" (P16E) One parent described this peer pressure as filling her with, "Incredible anxiety about how [I am] bringing up my children." (P14E)

As well as providing encouragement for their children's learning, parents who believed in being a Developer saw their role as that of providing their children with basic skills. One parent commented that, "You deliver the child to the school with a fairly strong grounding, at the very least the alphabet." (P24E) Other parents spoke of preparing their children for school by using magnetic letters on the fridge door and teaching their

children the alphabet and how to write their name. Two parents thought that the teachers in the school had let their children down, especially when it came to helping children learn to read. One of these parents parent commented, "Sometimes I felt that we are trying to fill a void that wasn't being covered on the reading side,"(P13E), and another parent insisted that it was through her efforts alone that her children had learned to read.

She stated:

I really, really feel that I single handedly taught both of my children to read, they did not learn at school. It was by sheer force of sitting down with them and painfully working with them every day that they learned how to read. (P15E)

This group of parents feel, as one parent expressed, "It is the parent's responsibility to keep on top of [a child's learning]," (P25E), and they expect to provide their children with skills they think their children may not be being taught in school. Parents who are Developers also provide their children with a range of resources that they consider will support their children's learning. One parent ensured that her children had access to resources such as, "Books and paper, and in the kitchen... an art drawer with their coloring and journal and everything is in there,"(P19E), and this same parent also provided resource books to help her child with project work. One mother explained her difficulties in finding books to help her child with project work. Her son was asked to find resources about a person of eminence he had chosen to portray as part of a class project, and the mother found it very difficult to get a library book suitable for him. She expressed her concern about this, and she thought that the teacher should have been more careful in ensuring that there was adequate information available on the topic chosen.

Parents who believe in being Developers enlist other family members in helping a child learn. One parent stated, "Grandmother listens to her [read]," (P21ESL), while another commented, "I hear her read a story to her brother." (P20ESL) One parent explained how enlisting the help of family members may be a long-term situation, when she noted, "I have a sister who was eleven years older than me ... she became a primary teacher, and she used me as a guinea pig." (P18E) It appears that parents who are Developers have the same beliefs about family involvement in children's learning as parents who are Carers and Supporters.

#### **5. 4. 2. Concepts of literacy**

Parents who were Developers are prepared to provide skill-based literacy tuition based on how they think children learn, rather than reinforcing the work of the school. One parent who tried to ensure that her child had what she considered to be necessary preschool literacy skills, described her approach to helping her child learn to read:

She knew her sight words and she was starting to sound things out ... she could read 'bat,' 'cat', rhyming ... she had all of the preliterate skills down, the rhyming, all her sounds, started to learn some of the phonics, but she could read 'the cat is fat', those kinds of things. (P18E)

However, for another parent in this category the emphasis on a phonetic approach to helping her child learn to read was not well accepted at first. This mother explained how, "It was only when I started teaching [my daughter] that I realized how necessary [phonemes] are." (P18E) Parents who are Developers support their children's literacy development in other ways. These parents place great emphasis on their children being

able to comprehend their reading. One parent expressed this need for children to understand what they were reading this way:

I think being literate means that you have good comprehension, and it is not necessarily having a great vocabulary, it is understanding well the vocabulary you do have so your comprehension is on a par with what you can read. It is irrelevant if you can read it but can't comprehend it. There [are] lots of kids who have really great spelling skills but maybe not the comprehension. (P25E)

Two parents used special ways of finding out if their children could comprehend what they had read. As one parent explained, "We use sign language or Pig Latin, just to see if they comprehend, to give them an opportunity of expressing it in a different way other than English," (P14 ESL) and another commented, "I am a teacher of infant sign language ... the baby signing thing made sense to me because I knew that kids understood language a lot sooner than they could use it." (P18E)

For these parents, reading is seen as something that children should enjoy. As one parent expressed, "I love to see her getting the excitement of reading." (P18E) Reading is also a means of accessing knowledge, and books are seen as a valuable resource. One parent described how books were used in her home:

[We help our children by] providing resource books like books on dinosaurs or bugs, but then going into the books about the world's greatest questions or almanacs, those types of books, because if they don't want to sit and read chapter after chapter, they can sit and read as much as they want, so they will always have books. Each of their beds right now have four or five books in them, they just bring books up to bed... so we are kind of forcing it because we understand the value of books. (P15E)

For parents who believed in being Developers, children's reading may extend beyond books. A mother described her daughter's use of environmental print when she stated,



“She is so proud of herself, that she can read. She reads on the bus, store names, and [reports] ‘that store is having a sale!’”(P18E)

Parents whose beliefs predominantly belonged to the Developer category considered that children learn in a developmental fashion, and they accept that parents may have to endure some difficult stages during a child’s reading development. One parent described her relief when her child had progressed to the next stage of reading when she commented, “My six-year old is now learning how to read, so now he is picking up books and starting to read, rather than the painful sounding out,”(P14ESL), and another described how her child’s spelling had caused her difficulties. “She’s been writing for the last year, at first it was just sort of rambling letters but for the last six to eight months it has been phonetic, so if you read it phonetically you understand what she is saying.” (P24E) One parent commented on liking to see the learning that is inherent in a child’s developmental process when she said:

When [my daughter] does her writing she spells things how they sound, and I like that no one is correcting her because she is spelling things how she thinks they should be spelt, and you can tell that she has been left to her own devices to figure that out, and I think that is amazing. (P18E)

However, two parents expressed their surprise at how quickly their children had learned to read. One stated that, “[My daughter] had a two week period where she went from almost nothing to right up with her grade level – it was really funny... [it happened] overnight!”(P20ESL), and another commented, “I was just really impressed by the way she would figure it [reading] out.”(P18E) These parents may not have understood the developmental stages their children were going through. One parent who wanted to

understand her child's level of ability said, "That has been the biggest gift for me, learning what other children at different ages are doing." (P6E)

These parents are also open to understanding literacy as being more than just a facility with text. One parent spoke for others when she said, "[I like] the idea that being able to tell a story is a literacy skill ... whether you write [a story] in words, or tell [a story] is a literacy skill." (P18E) Parents who are developers realize that a view of literacy as being multifaceted has implications for the teaching that takes place in the school. As one parent explained, "the more exposure to a variety of ways of teaching literacy, it just opens their minds to it." (P7E)

#### **5. 4. 3. How children learn**

Most of the parents who believe that their role in helping their children develop literacy is that of Developer had been educated in Canada. Only two of these parents commented on their own schooling, both in negative terms. One father commented how his experience of school had been unhappy. He stated, "I remember hating school, I was bored to tears and I think that is the worst possible thing," (P24E), and this had led him to seek a different type of school for his child. Another parent described how she had seen, "a lot of [her] uncles and aunts who did not get past grade 6 and [she had] realized how important it was to get educated." (P14ESL) As a result she was actively involved in her children's education, in contrast to her experiences as a child.

Parents who believe in being Developers consider that children learn in different ways.

One parent explained, "If kids need to move and to have chaos around them so [that] they can learn, so be it,"(P25E), and another described children's preferred learning style in these terms: "It is all sort of creative learning ... and they all go about it in their own way." (P6E)

These parents believe that children's literacy learning takes place when children use literacy within specific contexts, and for specific purposes. One mother explained how her son had started writing as a result of a specific need. In answer to a question about when her son started to write she replied, "He wanted to have a private place so he was asking me how to write 'Do not enter' and he made a sign. He can't read it but he knows his sister can!"(P7E)

The Vice Principal, who coordinated family literacy programs within the school, viewed literacy as part of the larger learning environment of children when she explained,

I think we are going to see, not literacy in a sense of just reading ... literacy in the sense of school readiness, as well, everything around ... singing, artistic literacy, musical literacy, working with print in different ways, oral language, movement, drama, dance, Not everything focused around books. (T3)

Another teacher who linked literacy learning to activities she saw happening within the child's home environment said, "Learning at home ... even things like writing birthday cards, shopping, cooking, using a recipe, there all sorts of those activities that are integrated at home and literacy is embedded in those activities." (T12)

One parent, having seen how the school helped her child's literacy development, commented that she now understood she could help her child learn in different ways. She stated, "It's kind of neat... the way you can sneak in literacy learning [into different activities]." (P7E) Another parent commented on how skills that lead to children's literacy learning may often go unnoticed. She suggested that:

[Parents] could follow their kids lead and realize that, while [they] are so obsessed about learning your kids ABC's (sic) your child now knows the name of every single bug ...or that red and green make purple... but [parents] are so focused [on] that my kid is [at a certain developmental stage] and can't count to ten yet, or that all her friends can do the alphabet, [that they miss the fact that] when she draws, her drawing[s] are amazing. (P18E)

Parents who believed in being Developers believe that if their children enjoy learning they will learn more, and that a child's learning does not just take place in school. As one parent commented:

If they are happy and balanced I know that they are going to learn more and absorb more, our learning doesn't stop at school ...the children have to be enthused first, bringing home the enthusiasm 'I have to get this done!' Once you get a child enthused about something there is no other influence that will stop them doing that. (P25E)

Although parents who believed in their role as Developers see themselves as teachers to their children, they are aware that they may not have the skills they need to adequately fill this role. One parent expressed surprised on learning that, "There's a way to teach reading that I had no appreciation for, even though I know how to read ... it just wouldn't have occurred to me that there was a strategy to it." (P6E)

#### **5. 4. 4. Issues of Agency – who helps children learn?**

For parents who believed in being Developers, the responsibility of teaching children is shared between teacher and parent. When asked whose responsibility it is to teach children, one parent responded, “I think it is both, we are sending our kids to school for a long time every day and I hope that [teachers] are going to take some responsibility, but I really believe that the parents have to show a keen interest.”(P18E) One parent, who appeared to have thought about this for some time, suggested “The secret to education is finding the right environment, and people, and system for your child.” (P24E) However, the understanding that both parents and teachers have a role to play in helping children learn did not imply that the roles had equal power. For these parents, teachers will always be seen as having more ability to help children learn than they do, because teachers have the information the parents need, information about individual children and about how to teach them.

#### **5. 4. 5. Parental beliefs in their role as Developer: Summary**

Those parents who believed that the parental role in helping children learn is that of Developer try to emulate the role of the teacher in the classroom. They are concerned about how their children learn and want to ensure that their children receive the individual attention they need to meet their learning needs. These parents feel that they are responsible for ensuring that their children learn school-like skills in the home, either before they enter school or when they are in school. Although these parents accept that they have an important role to play in helping their children learn, they understand that it

is the teacher who has the knowledge, both about how children learn and how to meet their child's needs.

### **5. 5. Parental beliefs in their role as Nurturer**

The term Nurturer is used in this study to describe parents who believe they can help their children learn by providing encouragement and support for the development of their children's skills in a way that encourages their children to grow and become confident. Interview responses indicated that only one parent, a father who had opted to place his daughter in this school, (P24E), saw his role in this way, but that all the teachers believed that this was the best way that parents could help children's literacy development. This paucity of responses from parents about this way of helping their children learn may be because the parents did not understand the value to children's learning of providing them with life experiences and language skills. These learning experiences may have been taking place in the home but the parents did not attach any particular value to them as a means of helping their children learn literacy skills.

The teachers' preference for Nurturer as the best role for parents did not negate their understanding that parents may also act as Carer, Supporter or Developer, in order to help their children learn. The teachers' beliefs that the most appropriate parental role in helping their children learn is that of Nurturer was based on their experiences of middle class family life in Canada, their training as teachers, and their in-school discussions about supporting families.

### **5. 5. 1. The role of the family**

Parents who believe in their role as Nurturers are described by teachers as those parents and families that provide their children with the kind of language skills and experiences that will allow them both to communicate with others and to develop thinking skills. As one teacher describes this role, "Parents [are] talking with their children ... building language and concepts during discussion and conversation." (T2) Teachers would like to see parents do this in two ways. The first was described by one teacher as, "Talking about the kinds of things that you are doing ... having language in the home, I think that sometimes there is just not enough talk and dialogue that is going on." (T1) The teachers would like to see parents having conversations with their children, conversations that, as one teacher explained, allowed children, "to articulate their thoughts" (T5) Another teacher extended this idea when she pointed out that she wanted children and parents, "to participate in those [kinds of] discussions [where ideas are shared], to be participating within a small group doing something, to have confidence in sharing ideas." (T1) One parent also commented on the role of language in helping his child develop literacy: "(Literacy and language) are essentially two sides of the same coin." (P24E) However, he did not emphasize language in the way the teacher did.

The teachers in this study wanted parents and families to support children's learning by providing children with things to talk about. One teacher said, "I think the more experiences the kids have, the more background they have ... they can interact more, they can contribute more ... just giving the kids experiences [helps them learn]." (T7) The teachers understood that, as one teacher pointed out, "Experiential learning does not

mean that you have to go around the world, it is just a way of thinking and figuring out your environment.” (T11) One teacher described experiential learning as providing children, “with wonderful opportunities to predict, analyze and see things and to have the confidence to answer questions more confidently.” (T6) Another teacher commented how she had tried to help one of her students get more learning experiences in her life, but that this was difficult, because when the child went home she was looked after by her grandfather and he wanted to watch television all the time and would not allow the child to go outside, as the fence to the yard was broken.

One teacher pointed out that, in her experience, children with good language skills benefited more from their education than those children whose language skills appeared to be poor. She described her feelings this way:

I think about the children who come with a leg up so to speak, when they come in to us in kindergarten, it is children who are confident in articulating themselves within that group, around discussions who have an understanding when we put a concept forward... What is a volcano? It's kids who have language that shows that they have had conversations around that ... you can see the difference between children who have been talking about the kinds of things that they are doing ... having language in the home, I think that sometimes there is just not enough talk and dialogue that is going on. (T11)

It is interesting to note that this teacher appeared to be talking about children who used English to communicate, and that the children in her class who were not fluent in English might be experiencing one of the early stages of language adjustment described by Tabors (1997). The children who were unconfident about their developing English language skills would be reticent to use them in the classroom.



Only one teacher commented that the kind of experience a child might be having in the home could differ from the experiences teachers might recognize. She noted that, "Many kids do have a lot of literacy experiences, but [these experiences] may not be the kind that are recognized by the school. If your mum and dad own a grocery store ... [children] are getting a whole lot of experiences around literacy." (T2) She suggested that this might account for children's apparent lack of vocabulary and language experience in the classroom, and went on to suggest that the teachers should be referring to the kind of experiences children were having, rather than expecting all children to have had the same kinds of experiences.

The role of Nurturer implies that parents are able to spend time with their children to encourage their budding skills of communication, as well as provide children with experiences that will help them make sense of their world. In busy families this may not be possible, and, in families where the child is left with elderly grandparents while his or her parents work, it may be that the grandparents do not have the energy to provide children with the experiences and conversation this role requires. One teacher accepted that communication between family members might not be in English and accepted that the use of, "the [language] that is spoken in the home, the one they are most comfortable in," (T2), provided similar benefits to that of English.

### **5. 5. 2. Concept of literacy**

Those teachers who believe that the parents' role in helping children learn should be that of Nurturer view literacy as socially constructed, and believe that literacy learning takes

place when children interact with parents, teachers and other students. These teachers believe parents help children's literacy development by reading to them, but one teacher expressed a different view about the importance of parents reading to their children when she pointed out that teachers can compensate for this lack of shared book reading. She stated:

Reading with their families ... the kids might come with a difference [in their experience of] that in kindergarten. [Teachers] maybe able to see that one child knows where a book cover is and [where] the back is [but] some children may not [know this], but by January that has worked itself out, almost always. (T8)

Her teaching colleague agreed with her, but expressed concern over the level of language of the children entering kindergarten:

But children who have had that experience in that oral language, in talking with their parents, in talking with families, and children who haven't it seems less ... it is a much longer ... um... hill to climb for the children who haven't. (T11)

Some teachers linked language skills directly to writing ability. As one teacher noted, "Usually the kids that... have a good grasp of the language ... are better writers, they better understand the structure of the spoken sentence, so that they can record a thought even if they don't speak it out loud." (T5)

It is interesting to note the contrast between the teachers' view of children who do not use language in the classroom and how a multicultural worker explained children's apparent lack of verbal skills. Her impression was that, "ESL students don't want to ask questions

that the others think are stupid questions.” (SS1) However, there may be many other cultural explanations for why a child may be reticent to speak out in class.

For teachers who believe that parents should be Nurturers, literacy learning is seen as being closely linked to a child’s attitude to learning and to his or her level of self-confidence. They believe that by encouraging and praising a child’s efforts to read and write, his or her self-confidence and positive attitude about learning would increase. These teachers are experts in giving young children encouragement, as this comment shows:

I think so much of literacy learning at this age is tied to confidence and feeling comfortable, so I think that when somebody is encouraged [to believe] that they are a great reader...[and] their writing is accepted, even if it is only a line on a paper, and that their reading is accepted [even] if they have [only] learned a word, and that they [think they] are readers when they are talking about the pictures, then they are readers. (T10)

But parents may not be as adept at providing their children with the confidence and encouragement they need and this can lead to difficulties in reporting back to parents.

Teachers from two classes with children in kindergarten, grade 1 and 2 appeared to have mixed feelings about their Home Reading Program. One teacher described what she wanted parents to achieve when they read with their children as, “a love of reading and a love of learning.” (T11) She felt that this could not be achieved by parents reading to children for twenty minutes every day. Nevertheless, though she expressed both her and her teaching partners feelings when she stated, “We feel that [spending this time every

day] is not the best way to get kids to love to read,”(T11), the teachers still sent reading books home with the children, but they did not ask parents to record this shared reading.

One teacher spoke for all the teachers when she described the school’s philosophy that children’s literacy learning takes place within the context of other learning situations and how the classroom teachers approached this way of learning literacy. She explained:

[In the classroom] literacy learning is integrated [with other subjects], and the way we believe [it happens] is [by having] a theme, and all those specific [literacy] learning areas are integrated into the one theme ... areas of interest for the kids. So, a specific literacy program doesn’t really fit with what we do because literacy is involved with learning but doesn’t stand on its own. It is all integrated into everyday experience. (T6)

### **5. 5. 3. How children learn**

Teachers who believe that a parent’s role is to nurture a child’s learning understand how important play is in helping children learn. These teachers allow for play to take place in the classrooms. As one teacher explained, “A big part of how we plan our program is giving tons of hands on, tons of extra learning, lots of play, unstructured play, playful learning.” (T11) The importance teachers put on play as a form of learning is demonstrated by the work some teachers put into promoting a Games Days in the school, where children and families were encouraged to play and learn together. These teachers see learning as taking place in context, and helped children learn by engaging children in project work in which literacy learning was integrated with other learning. The teachers’ approach to teaching relied, in Bernstein’s terminology, on a “weak” framework where subjects were not differentiated.

For these teachers learning takes place when children are feeling confident and have a good attitude to learning. One teacher expressed this ability to learn in the following way:

The children who are able to think independently, who have the confidence to problem solve independently and to vocalize, to speak about how they feel and what they think, to me that is the most valuable thing. (T7)

Another teacher, comparing the benefits of a child's ability to read with that of their attitude to learning, pointed out:

The children who have ... an extensive sight word vocabulary and decoding skills ... that is always an asset, but I find the most valuable is when they have just that wonderful approach to learning, loving to learn, wanting to find out more and having the confidence to find out more. (T6)

#### **5. 5. 4. Issues of agency – who helps children learn?**

Within this belief of parents as Nurturers is an understanding that, although both parents and teachers have important roles to play in helping children learn, these roles are separate and complementary. Teachers would like parents to provide children with what they consider to be the basic tools of learning, such as interest, confidence, language, and the kind of experiences that help children develop concepts and understanding about the world. Teachers may then use these attributes to guide children to more specific learning.

Parents who believe in being Nurturers, and parents who believe in being Carers, both accept a division between the roles of the parents and teachers. However, the parent who believed in the role of Nurturer assumed he had ability and agency to help children learn, whereas Carers assumed that they did not.

#### **5. 5. 5. Parental beliefs in their role as Nurturer: Summary**

The teachers in this study believed that best way parents could help their children learn was by being a Nurturer. They wanted parents to provide children with the type of life experiences and language skills that would allow children to interact with others in ways that promote shared learning experiences. They saw learning as a social act, one in which those children with the social skills and language abilities that allowed them to share knowledge and learning would benefit more from their schooling than those children with a more passive, deferential approach to their learning. The teachers in this study appeared to appreciate that there is a difference between what the school could offer and what the parents could offer.

#### **5. 6. Chapter summary**

Analysis of the interviews showed that parents held four main beliefs about their role in their children's literacy development: Carer; Supporter; Developer; and Nurturer. Nine of the parents in the study tended to believe that their role was that of a Carer; five of the parental beliefs were predominantly that of Supporters; ten believed in their role as Developers; one parent was a Nurturer. All the eleven teachers in this study would have liked the parents to adopt the role of Nurturer.

Parents' and teachers' beliefs and expectations about the parents' role in helping children learn described by the four categories above, overlap. For example, those teachers who believe that parents should be Nurturers and provide children with experiences and language skills also accept that parents need to provide their children with the necessities of life (Carer role) and with literacy skills, such as letter recognition and spelling

(Supporter and Developer roles). Some of the parents whose beliefs were classified as that of a Carer also express beliefs that they can use books with their children to help them learn (Supporter role).

Although the predominant beliefs of parents may belong in one category, several parents expressed beliefs that could belong to another category. For example, one mother who was predominantly a Developer commented that she believed in bribing her children to learn. Using extrinsic rewards to help children learn relates to the beliefs of parents who were Carers.

There are similarities between and among the different beliefs in the parental role:

- parents whose predominant beliefs were those of a Carer tended to believe that teachers were responsible for teaching their children and that teachers had the power to set the curriculum. These parents wanted the teachers to tell them what was expected of them in supporting children's learning and believed that they were responsible for ensuring that they and their children did what the school expected them to do. Parents whose predominant beliefs in their role of helping children learn was that of a Carer expected their children to be taught the conventions of language, such as vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure;
- parents whose predominant belief in how they could help their children learn was that of a Supporter also felt that the teachers were responsible for teaching their

children what they considered to be suitable curriculum content. However, these parents also believed that parents had the responsibility to review and reinforce the curriculum their children were following in class. They expected their children to be taught some language skills such as spelling and comprehension. Parents with the predominant beliefs in their role as Supporter were more open than parent with predominant beliefs in their role as Carers to an emergent approach to literacy learning;

- parents whose belief in their role in helping children learn was that of a Developer believed that although the teachers had more knowledge to help their children learn than they did, they too, were responsible for helping their children learn. These parents believed that not only could they help their children with schoolwork, but also, by understanding their child's learning strengths and weaknesses, they could meet their child's specific learning needs. While professing belief in the emergence of literacy skills, these parents too wanted their children to be taught specific reading and writing skills;
- the parent who believed that he could help his child by adopting the role of a Nurturer, and the teachers who thought that parents could help their children learn by being Nurturers, believed that, although teachers had an important role to play in helping children learn, it was the parents' responsibility to ensure that their children were ready to benefit from this learning. Parents whose predominant belief in their role in helping children learn was that of a Nurturer, and the



teachers, believed that children would become literate when exposed to a variety of stimulating experiences and dialogue around language and literacy awareness.

It appears that the parental beliefs of Carers are aligned with a “bottom up” approach to literacy development, where children become literate by being taught the skills they need to read and write before they use these skills to help them learn. The belief in the parental role of Nurturer reflect a more “top down” approach to literacy development where children are exposed to a wide variety of literacy experiences, and that specific literacy skills such as spelling and sentence structure are presented to them as the need arises. The parental beliefs in the roles of Supporters and Developers reflect a mix of autonomous and ideological approaches to literacy development with those parents who believed in their role as Supporters tending more to an autonomous approach than those parents who believed in their role as Developers.

### **5. 7. Comments on these results**

These results to the first research question surprised me. I had expected that parents would have a range of beliefs about the parental role in children’s literacy development and that these beliefs would overlap in some ways with the range of beliefs held by the teachers. I did not expect to find the four categories of belief as described above. I had intended to address the second research question, a comparison of the beliefs of teachers and parents to determine the amount and type of common understanding that existed between them, by examining the ways that the beliefs of the parents overlapped with those of the teachers, but the finding that the teachers’ and the parents beliefs overlapped

in a variety of ways, prevents me from addressing the second and third research questions in the way I had anticipated.

As part of the interview process I had asked both parents and teachers whether or not they thought that the school could provide parents with the support they needed to help their children's literacy development, and if they agreed that the school could support parents in helping their children's literacy development, how this might be achieved. I had expected to use their responses to review aspects of the school-based family literacy programs to determine which aspects led to improved knowledge sharing between teachers and parents.

Although the parents agreed that the school had a role to play in helping them help their children's literacy development, they did not suggest that the primary way the school could support them was through family literacy programs. The coding of the interview responses indicated that there were only 29 comments made about family literacy programs and that these came from just six participants. However, there were many more comments made about how the home/school links impacted on their relationship to the school. There were 92 comments made by 18 participants in the study about issues relating to communication between parents and teachers, and 109 comments made by 19 participants about the school supporting parents.

It appeared that the parents considered that the best way the school could help them support their children's learning related to the nature of communication between the home and the school and the nature of home/school links.

Whatever the parents' and teachers' beliefs about parental roles in helping children's literacy learning, their beliefs were based on a desire to help children learn. It has been my experience, and data from this research supports this, that all parents and teachers want to do their best to help children learn, and that parents are eager to find out more about how they can fulfill their roles. It was, therefore, somewhat depressing to realize that all the parents in this study expressed some degree of frustration at being unable to obtain, from the school, the information they felt needed to be able to fulfill their role. The teachers too, had concerns about the level and quality of the communication that existed between them and the parents of the children in their care. This issue will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 6: ISSUES OF COMMON UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN PARENTS AND TEACHERS**

### **6. 1. Introduction**

The first part of this chapter addresses the second research question in this study, “What, if any, are the common areas of understanding between parents and teachers that may be used to promote the development of effective parent/teacher partnerships?” Teacher beliefs about the parental role are compared with those of the parents to determine the amount, and type, of the common understanding that exists between them. Data from each category of parents, as set out in the previous chapter, will be used to illuminate how the beliefs of the teachers converge with those of the parents. Analysis of this data lead to the development of six questions that may be applied to the family literacy programs in the school in a way that enables teachers to understand the extent to which these programs increase the amount of common understanding that exists between parents and teachers participating in these programs.

The second part of this chapter addresses the third research question, “How can these findings be used to suggests how the family literacy programs may be adapted to increase the communication alignment between parents and teachers?” The six analytical questions created in response to the second research question are applied to each of the family literacy programs in the school, to identify possible adaptations to the family literacy programs that may have the potential to increase shared understanding between

parents and teachers. The chapter concludes by presenting a new approach to the presentation of family literacy programs in schools, one that incorporates the findings from this study.

#### **6. 1. 1. Congruence between the beliefs of teachers and parents.**

Comments made by the teachers indicated a level of convergence between their beliefs and those of the parents. The teachers, who believed that the most important way parents could help children learn was by parents adopting the role of Nurturer, demonstrated an understanding of some aspects of the other three roles parents might adopt. For instance, teachers understood the need for children to be able to recognize letters and letter sounds. One teacher pointed out that she often suggested to parents that they use magnetic letters on their refrigerator to help children learn their letters. This comment demonstrated that the teacher, a Nurturer, included one aspect of the literacy beliefs that the other three categories of parents believed in.

However, her suggestion to the parents about how to help their children with letter recognition was presented in a way that parents who believed in being Carers and Supporters would find difficult to accept. This teacher had assumed that, as a result of having to repeat this suggestion many times, the parents did not want to help their children learn. However, parents who believed in being Carers and Supporters would have viewed her suggestion to use magnetic letters as an invitation for the child to play, rather than engaging the child in a learning activity, and therefore would not understand the teacher's suggestion and, as a result, would ignore it. The parents' lack of follow

through about the teacher's suggestion was not caused by their lack of concern about their children's learning but because the teacher's suggestion was outside their beliefs about how they could help their children learn. For these groups of parents, basic literacy instruction was formalized around print-based structured activities.

All the teachers in the study expressed their belief that reading to children was an important aspect of the parental role. As one teacher suggested, "Reading nightly... and pointing out different sight words"(T8) was how parents could support children's learning. The teachers were open about the language parents might use to read to their children, as one teacher commented, "[Parents should] read to their children in any language they can read."(T6)

The teachers appeared to agree with the parents who believed in being Supporters and Developers when they suggested that a way parents could support their child's learning was providing children with learning resources. One teacher suggested that parents could help their children learn by "taking [children] to the library, having books at home about their interests."(T10) It is interesting to reflect on the comments made by one of the multicultural workers, cited in the last chapter, describing how difficult it is for Vietnamese parents to obtain books, or use the library service.

The teachers in the study understood that parents might be using drill and repetition to help their children's literacy development, a literacy learning practice they did not believe was the best way to help children learn. One teacher commented, "I have parents

who are drilling their children with ... sight words ... and I accept it for a while,” (T11) and another seemed less inclined to condemn the parents who were doing this when she said, “I think nothing the parents do is going to hurt them. If they are flashing cards at them, then that’s OK if that is what they want to do.”(T6) One teacher pointed out, “Some parents think [children] must have lots and lots of homework and workbooks [to help their children learn],”(T11) while another appeared to be more generous in her perception about what the parents were achieving when she said, “Anything [the parents do] can help [children learn]. ... [Even] if it comes from a different philosophical angle... it’s still going to fit, it will all eventually create a literate child.” (T9)

These teachers knew that many parents supported their children’s learning by sending their children to tutors and special language classes. One teacher pointed out that he thought several children in his class were receiving extra tuition and he suggested that if he “sat down and asked my class how many of them go to “brain classes” ... there [would be] a lot [of children going].”(T7) Although this teacher appeared to be ambivalent about the benefits of some of the tutoring children received, two other teachers accepted that the extra tutoring might be beneficial for some children. One of the teachers described how “[a child] was sent to Chinese school ... it really helped his vocabulary,” (T2) and the other teacher explained how she thought these tutoring sessions might provide children with culturally acceptable ways of learning when she stated, “[I] often hear people being disparaging about [private math classes] ... [but] it may fit into a traditional way of learning ... we need to think how we can use [these traditional methods] to get to what we want [children to learn].” (T2) This teacher, in appearing to have an awareness

of how culturally appropriate behavior might impact children's learning explained, "You have to be very careful [in some cultures] what you say to someone just one year older than you."(T2)

### **6. 1. 2. Common understanding between teachers and parents.**

The comments of the teachers in this study indicated that, although they understood some of the different ways parents help their children learn, these differed from the ways they believed parents should be helping their children learn. By comparing the parents' beliefs in their roles of Carer, Supporter and Developer with those of the teachers' beliefs in parents as Nurturers it was possible to illustrate how these differences might create barriers to parent/teacher cooperation around supporting children's learning.

#### **6. 1. 2. 1. Common understanding between teachers and parents who believed their role in helping children's literacy development was that of a Carer**

Parents who believed in being Carers consider that the teachers are responsible for educating their children, and that their role in helping their children learn is to ensure their children complete their schoolwork. To be able to fulfill this role, parents who believe in being Carers needed the teachers to provide them with information about what their children were expected to learn and how the teachers expected the parents to help their children learn. As one multicultural worker suggested, "The first week of the year... the teacher [could] tell us what is expected of the child, of the parent, every day ... give [the parents] instructions!" (SS1) These parents need their children to have



homework so that they could understand what their children are learning in school.

Homework appears to be the only way these parents can get information on what their children are doing in school, as language barriers prevent them from asking the teachers about their children's work. If the children are not given homework, the parents are unable to help them. As the multicultural worker explained, "There is no reinforcement in the home, there is no repetition of what they learn in school." (SS1)

Parents who believe in being Carers expect teachers to hold them accountable for making sure that children do their schoolwork. As the Vietnamese multicultural worker rationalized, "It's accountability, that is the bottom line, parents are not asked to do it ... [when] parents get the easy way the child gets the easy way." (SS1) These parents see the lack of set homework for their children, not as a school philosophy, but as a way for teachers to avoid work. The multicultural worker reasoned, "Many teachers just don't like [giving homework] because it is extra work for them." (SS1) Without direction from the school about the work their children are expected to do, and the level of responsibility the parents are expected to take to ensure that children do the work, parents who take on the role of Carer may be confused about their role and unsure what to do to help their children learn.

The lack of homework is not the only barrier to parents who take on the role of Carer as a way to help their children learn. These parents also need a way to understand their child's level of progress. The Vietnamese father in the study commented that he had difficulty understanding how well his child was learning, and suggested that, "[The

parents] need letter grades so we know how our children are doing.”(P5v) Many of the parents in this category had limited English language skills preventing them from either talking to their children’s teachers or understanding comments on report cards. This issue was also illustrated by the comments of a multicultural worker when she explained, “There is a language barrier [in parent teacher relationships] because when the parents come to the school they cannot express themselves [in English].” (SS1)

This language barrier extends beyond the need for direct translation, as one teacher’s story illustrated. This teacher was using a translator in a parent/teacher conference with a parent who was a Spanish speaker. This teacher had some knowledge of the Spanish language but did not feel confident enough in her skills to communicate with the parent in Spanish. During the parent/teacher conference, she began to question how the translator was translating her comments to the parent and she reported that, “[The translator] was saying to the parent ‘I don’t really understand what [the teacher] said, but we can chit-chat for a minute and then I can go back to her’... so I said [to the translator], ‘Wait a minute ... why don’t you understand what I said?’”(T1) The teacher suggested that direct translation might not address all the issues relating to language barriers when she said, “I am wondering how much translators understand [about] what is happening [in school].”(T2)

The translators used in parent/teacher conferences do not always have an understanding of the school system, whereas multicultural workers, acting as a bridge between teachers and parents, are aware of the school system. However, they too, do not always translate

the teachers' words directly. One of the multicultural workers in this study, who had also acted as a translator during parent/ teacher conferences, recounted how, on occasion, teachers would question the number of words it took her to translate one of their sentences. She explained how she not only had to translate the words, but also the concept behind the words, in order for parents to be able to understand what was being said.

This parental lack of understanding of educational concepts was highlighted by a Speech and Language consultant who reported that, during a family literacy program aimed at providing parents with new ways of communicating with their children, she had asked parents to "follow their child's lead" when trying to help them learn. The translator who was working with her had replied that she although she could translate the phrase it didn't mean anything to her, let alone the parents. The Speech and Language consultant said that it had taken twelve sessions of carefully demonstrating to these parents what was meant by the concept before the parents began to understand it.

Differences in how different languages are structured lead to problems of communication between parents who believe in being Carers and the teachers in the school. As a multicultural worker explained, "Sometimes, the report card says [first, that] your child is doing well, and [then] the next part says there is a problem. With our people, if you start with a positive [comment] you negate the negative." (SS2) Difference in how messages were structured caused confusion for parents who took on the role of Carer and the multicultural worker explained that many parents, as a result of a language structure

which was new to them, did not understand that their children were experiencing difficulties. One multicultural worker went as far as explaining to parents that, "All the report cards are written the same way, because of a child's self esteem, and people in Canada are kind and nice, and you cannot trust them!" (SS1)

While I am not sure I agree with her sentiment about this issue, I developed an awareness of her feelings about report cards, and how they are difficult for these parents to understand. In an earlier, unrecorded, conversation on this topic, I had asked this multicultural worker what percentage of the parents she worked with understood their children's report cards. She thought for a while before replying, "About 10%, that is, 10% of those that can understand English!" (SS1)

When I presented information about the difficulties parents had in understanding report cards to a group of the teachers when conducting a member check, the teachers readily agreed that there was a problem in using report cards as a means of communication with parents. Several of the teachers explained they were concerned about telling the parents about any learning difficulties their children were having because of the teachers' fears about the parents' reactions. One teacher described how, during a parent/teacher conference, a father had disciplined his child despite the teacher telling the father that the child had worked hard and made good progress in class but that he had failed to get top marks in his work. The teacher felt that the father disciplined the child unnecessarily and she was anxious about the child's self esteem as a result.

I suggest that this parent, seeing his role as that of a Carer, might have felt responsible for making sure that his child learned the work set by the teacher, and, that the failure of the child to achieve the perceived standards set by the teacher, reflected badly on his role as a parent. In disciplining his child, he was trying to fulfill what he saw as his role; he was trying to ensure that his child worked harder.

The way teachers reported to the parents raises two issues. First, the teachers appeared to be treating the parents in the same way they treated the children, emphasizing the positive aspects of the child's progress, in order to build the child's self esteem. The teachers were assuming that the parents were incapable accepting the truth, about their child's progress. I wonder whether this is the best approach to take with parents, parents who may be trying to help their children learn. It might appear to these parents that the teachers do not know how well their child is learning and that is the reason why teachers are not telling them about their child's progress.

Secondly, by emphasizing what the children could do over any difficulties the children might have been having, the teachers were not providing the parents with the information they needed to help their children learn. As one parent explained, "[In this school] the children are in the same class for three years, we do not know if they are clever enough to go to the next grade."(P10v)

Some of the ways that teachers might help parents who believe that their role in helping their children's literacy development is that of a Carer may be summarized as follows:

1. Provide regular homework
2. Provide some direction about how the school expects parents to help their children learn
3. Use letter grades on report cards
4. Provide parents with information about their child's grade level
5. Explain educational concepts to the parents
6. Provide translation when needed
7. Give parents a clear, timely, statement of any learning difficulties the child might be experiencing

**6. 1. 2. 2. Common understanding between teachers and parents who believed their role in helping children's literacy development was that of a Supporter**

In order to be able to fulfill their role as Supporters, parents need to know about the work their children are doing in school. As one parent commented, "The main thing is, I want teachers to tell me what they do, so I can practice at home."(P23ESL) These parents view homework as a way to provide the information they need to help their children. When their children are not given regular homework they feel that they are less able to fulfill their role in helping their children learn. As one parent explained, "The school could help us out with this, give us homework ... there is no homework, and that is my main concern."(P23) If children are not given homework to do, these parents feel that any help they are giving their children is, as one parent described it, "Like shooting arrows in the dark, I don't know if it is helping her."(P21ESL)

For parents who believe in being Supporters, information about their children's progress may allow them to understand the developmental stages of a child's learning. One parent expressed a need for information about her child's developmental level when she complained, "We don't see tests [in the school] ... [tests would help you] know where your kid stands ... [then] there would be no big shocks at the end of the year." (P23ESL) The need for parents to know whether or not their child is achieving learning goals is not confined to parents who are Supporters. Parents in the other three categories also expressed a need for teachers to inform them of their children's learning difficulties as soon as possible so that they could take measures to help their children. They did not want to wait until the first report card or parent/teacher conference to obtain this information.

The parents who believe in being Supporters expect the teachers to provide them with information about the kind of resources parents could use to supplement their child's school learning. One parent described the type of home/school communication she would like when she said, "I would like to see a journal come home with [my child] saying what [the children in class] did each day." (P15E) Another parent, determined to get the kind of information she needed from teachers said, "I talk to teachers and tell them, 'You need to tell me what to do at home', because I don't want to teach [my children] something new and confuse them." (P23ESL). This parent said that she needed information about the work her child was doing in class because she felt that, without her support, her child would "get lost, and then, when the teacher teaches them something but in a different

way [from the way I teach him], children get confused. He [will not] know what to do, which is the right way to do things.”(P23ESL) The same parent felt that, without this information, she was hampered in her efforts to her child learn: She stated, “[I don’t] know what they are working on at school, because [I can’t] come and bug the teacher every single day.” (P23ESL)

Some of the ways that teachers might help parents who believe that their role in helping their children’s literacy development is that of a Supporter may be summarized as follows:

1. Provide children with regular homework
2. Give parents a clear, timely, statement of any learning difficulties the child may be experiencing
3. Provide parents with information regarding resources they can use with their children
4. By reporting test results or grade level equivalencies for their child
5. Use a home/school journal that is sent home with the child
6. Provide letter grades on report cards
7. Suggest ways of helping their children learn that are consistent with the approach used by the teacher in school.



**6. 1. 2. 3. Common understanding between teachers and parents who  
believed their role in helping children's literacy development was that of a  
Developer**

The parents who believe in being Developers obtain the information they need to fulfill their role by talking to their children's teachers on an individual basis. It might be difficult for a teacher to provide these parents with this time if many of the children in the class have parents who are Developers. As one parent commented, "I talk to the teacher over and above the regular visits, when an issue comes up." (P17E) This type of parent/teacher communication takes the emphasis off homework as a way of letting parents know what their children are learning. One parent in this group, not needing her child to have homework in order to understand what he was learning in class, expressed her views about homework quite vehemently when she said, "I cannot stand homework: I think it is a torture chamber," (P25E) while another parent in this group commented, "Homework is not an issue." (P24E)

To fulfill their perceived role in meeting the specific learning needs of their children, parents who believe in being Developers need information about their child's learning strengths and weaknesses and about any learning difficulties their children may be experiencing. These parents also need knowledge about how to teach their children, and access to resources that enable them to do this.

Traditional ways of home/school communication do not appear to provide these parents with the type and amount of information they need to fulfill their role. Several of the

parents who believed in being Developers expressed dissatisfaction with report cards.

One parent objected to a phrase that teachers are obliged to use when children are failing:

She exclaimed, “‘Doesn’t meet widely held expectations’ doesn’t mean much!” (P15E)

The teachers in the study agreed with her concerns. As one teacher put it, “I don’t think

*we* know what it means!”(T10) Parents who are Developers encounter language

difficulties despite speaking the same language as the teachers. These parents had

difficulties in understanding the euphemisms used in report cards and suggested that this misunderstanding creates a level of distrust in the parents that pervades the whole system.

As one parent said, “For the teacher, the euphemism must go beyond the report card...

‘Let’s all just walk around and be happy, and not deal with these issues, because it is too difficult to handle.’” (P16E)

These parents were dissatisfied with the level of information they received about their

children during student-led parent/teacher conferences. One parent appeared to express

the feelings of others when she stated, “[I] want the kids out of parent/teacher

conferences.” (P15E) She explained this statement by saying that she had probably

helped her child complete most of the work her child was showing her, and that what she

wanted from the conferences was detailed information on her son’s progress rather than a review of his work. She said:

I’d like to sit down across the table, with my child in another room, and like ... [ask the teacher to] tell me how is my child doing? What are your concerns? What are her strengths? Where do we need to shore up? What do we need to be doing? (P15E)

She explained that she felt that she could only get this information by talking to the

teacher one-on-one.

Teachers too expressed dissatisfaction with the student-led parent/teacher conferences.

The teachers explained that, although they supported the philosophy behind student-led conferences, they did not feel having the conferences structured in this way allowed them enough time to talk to parents. The teachers also felt that having several parents and students in the room at the same time restricted their ability to say certain things to parents.

The parents who believed that their role in helping children's literacy development was that of a Developer expressed their concerns about other issues relating to parent/teacher communication, such as the information in the report cards being too late to be useful to them. As one parent commented, "His report cards say stuff, but once you get a report card, you do not have much time to turn things around." (P25E) For one parent report card comments came as an unwelcome surprise. This father explained, "Across the board, we expected her to be fine, it was like a negative report card, we were really surprised and taken aback." (P18E) One parent did not believe the information on the daughter's report card stating that her daughter could not read. This misinformation caused her to question the teacher's knowledge of her daughter's abilities and she commented, "My daughter is in kindergarten, but she could read sight words before she started [school] ... I realized, when I saw her report card, that the teacher didn't know she could read!" (P18E)

Some of the ways that teachers might help parents who believe that their role in helping their children's literacy development is that of a Developer may be summarized as follows:

1. Provide parents with suitable times to meet their child's teacher to discuss their concerns
2. Provide information on their child's learning strengths and weaknesses
3. Give parents information on resources to use that meet their children's needs
4. Make report cards more understandable by using simple language
5. Do not use student led conferences
6. Provide parents with clear, timely, information on any learning difficulties their children may have.

**6. 1. 2. 4. Common understanding between teachers and parents who believed their role in helping children's literacy development was that of a Nurturer**

As the data shows, the teachers in this study believed that the best way parents can help their children learn is by being Nurturers. There was, therefore, a great deal of common understanding between the one parent who considered himself as a Nurturer and the teachers in the study. It is interesting to note that the one parent in the study who was categorized as a Nurturer had opted to place his child this school because he agreed with the school's philosophy on helping children learn and on working with parents.

In order to fulfill his role as a Nurturer, this parent needed to have his role in his children's learning accepted and valued. This parent appeared to have an understanding of his child's learning level and, as a result, did not need detailed reports from the school. As he explained, "I don't need more detailed report cards, or letter grades, at this stage. I think it is not really meaningful, and I don't need to know whether my child is number 1, 2 or 3 in the class, that is not important."(P24E).

This parent's belief in his role as Nurturer was reinforced by his personal contact with his child's teacher. As this father recounted, he had approached his child's teacher to ask about helping his daughter learn her letters and expressed surprise to learn that he could teach her letter sounds as well as names. This parent expected the teacher to tell him if his daughter was experiencing any learning difficulties in a timely fashion.

Some of the ways that teachers might help parents who believe that their role in helping their children's literacy development is that of a Nurturer may be summarized as follows ;

1. Provide a non-formal learning environment
2. Allow the parent time for personal contact with the child's teacher
3. Provide clear, timely, information about any learning difficulties the child might be experiencing

Parents in each category were concerned that the traditional methods of parent/teacher communication, report cards and parent/teacher conferences, were not providing them with the information they required in order to be able to help their children learn. Results

from this study suggest that although the parents from each group require the same kind of information from teachers the different categories of parents require this information in slightly different ways in order to be able to fulfill their perceived role in helping their children learn.

The traditional methods of parent/teacher communication, such as report cards and parent/teacher conferences, failed to provide these parents with the information they needed to help their children learn. This lack of communication between the parents and the teachers raises an important question: How can parents obtain the information they need to expand their concept of their role in helping children learn?

The next section will address this question by looking at the comments made by five parents in this study who reported that they had expanded their beliefs in how they could help their children learn

## **6. 2. Fostering common understanding**

It appears from the comments made by several parents in the study that their beliefs about how they can help their children learn are open to change. Two parents, a married mother and father, whose beliefs had been categorized as having beliefs in being Carers, and three whose beliefs had been categorized as Supporters in this study. Comments from these parents in the study indicated that they had gradually come to understand more about how teachers expected them to support their children's learning.

One parent commented on how her beliefs about her role in helping her child had changed as a result of her child's attitude. She explained, "I try not to make her sit down and do stuff, she is very resistant to that, she says, 'School is where I learn, and home is where I relax, so don't make me do school stuff at home!'"(P20ESL) The same parent explained how, when her daughter was having trouble reading, she went into the classroom to meet her daughter's teacher, and "just seeing what they are doing in the classroom, and expanding on that," (P20ESL) had helped her understand more about how to help her child learn.

An understanding of what children may achieve in the Canadian education system helped two Vietnamese parents change their feelings about how they helped their child. These parents realized that the educational system could provide good career opportunities for their children. As the Vietnamese father explained through the translator, "Here it seems that everything [in school] is easy, but how come they have good engineers and doctors who are really smart?"(P13V) This realization led to the parents adopting a new way of working with their child. As the mother explained, "I asked her to teach me the way her teacher taught her, and I learned her way, and now... we spend time talking and she tells us what is happening at school."(P12V) This same parent went on to explain how her daughter now likes reading very much as a result of the parent's new approach to helping her child.

For another mother, it was the way her child had made progress in reading that had changed the way she helped her child learn. "The teacher said that they had no homework

for kids, but ... they ask us to do home reading. It is amazing, [my daughter] started pronouncing the words and now she has started reading.”(P22ESL)

For one parent, the invisible teaching that takes place in the classroom had become more visible to her. This parent had gained a better understanding of how children learned by being invited to participate in her child’s school day and watch how her daughter learned. This mother had been educated in Columbia and appeared pleased to learn about the Canadian educational system. She expressed her delight in this different educational system by stating, “The teacher knows [my daughter], and we talk about the things that she does [in the classroom]... it is a different process of learning and I am very curious to see it,” (P22ESL) and continued, “I really noticed how smart they were teaching (sic), and I tried to do it at home.”(P22ESL). This parent expressed how she was very afraid when she first saw the school, as it was so different from her experience of schooling, but she overcame her fears when “I came to the school every day, and saw what they were doing and [I] felt comfortable.”(P22ESL) This parent volunteered in the school so she that could, as she put it, “get to see how they teach”. Another parent had come to appreciate how the classes were organized in the school. She expressed her delight by saying, “I love the multi-age classes, I thought it was going to be [a] negative, when the kids entered school, [but] it works!”(P20E)

For one parent, it was the informal contact with the teachers in the school that helped her become less scared of teachers and seek advice about helping her child. As she commented, “The informal way teachers talk [makes me feel that I can talk to



them].”(P21E) This parent was brought up in ways that did not prepare her for interaction with her child’s teachers. As she explained, “Parents did not talk to teachers... teachers told them what they need[ed] to know, and a few [parents] might ask questions, but mostly the teachers did the talking.” (P21ESL) The relationship of power between parent and teacher had been altered by the type of contact she had with the teachers in her daughter’s school.

These results indicated that there may be four ways that parents can be encouraged to develop more understanding about the teachers’ beliefs in how parents can help their children learn. These are:

- children showing their parents different ways of learning;
- realizing how much their children are learning within the school system;
- knowing more about how teachers are helping their children learn;
- being made aware of the importance of their role.

The teachers also expressed a need to know how to adapt their family literacy programs to meet the needs of the parents.

The teachers expressed a need to understand more about children’s literacy experiences in the home in order to incorporate some of the activities into the classroom. One teacher commented, “I wish I could go [to a child’s] home sometimes, and see what is happening and make those connections,” (T5) and even if the actual home literacy practices are not integrated into the work of the school, there are other ways this knowledge could be

useful, as the Vice principal noted when she asked, "What were the literacy practices in the home and how could we parallel these?"(T3) The teachers in this study accepted that home literacy learning experiences had value for children. As one teacher pointed out, "It is [important] for us teachers to know what is going on in the home, and to know what kinds of valuable things are happening," (T5), and another teacher suggested that children's home literacy experiences could have a cultural basis that differed from that of the school but that still had value when she said, "There was like a plethora of ways parents support their kids at home that fit into what education is for them... it was all supportive." (T2)

The teachers wanted to support parents in helping their children learn and one teacher suggested that, "The best way we can help is to learn more about the parents... the more we know, then the more we can incorporate the kinds of experiences the kids have," (T2), and the same teacher suggested that, "We help parents by becoming more knowledgeable ourselves." (T2)

One teacher understood that children's experiences at home might differ from those of white middle class children. She suggested, "Thinking of the kinds of interactions that kids are going to experience, they are very different from like your dad's a doctor and your mum's a stay at home mum," (T7) and agreed that it was very important to understand the home lives of the families in the school because, as she explained, "If we don't look at their experiences we are saying your life is not important." (T7)

Finding out how families helped their children at home was an important step in the process of providing the parents with support. As the Vice Principal stated, "Finding out what do the parents want to know, what do they need to know, what do they want to share with us." (T3) However, teachers had an understanding of the size of the problem they might be facing in finding out about the wants and needs of parents from many different cultures. As one teacher commented, "[The problem] is way bigger than us, I really think it is way more than we can take on," (T2) but she did have a possible solution to the issue and she suggested that:

The piece that is ours, is for us to maybe come to understand the culture, what is important, what goes on at home, what are the experiences of these kids...we can value what is going on... but if we don't know what is going on... (T2)

The teachers had some suggestions about best approaches to learning more about the families. The Vice Principal suggested that, "You start with the community focus as opposed to the academic focus," (T3) and one teacher suggested, "I think the biggest challenge is finding ways of using a variety of strategies, different things to appeal to different parents." (T8) One teacher commented that, "[Parents] have to be part of the creation of a child's learning goals, how to support the child at home, if we aren't doing that we are just saying what needs to be done." (T2)

The teachers felt that just telling parents what they needed to do with their children in order to support their learning was not an effective way of creating positive parent/teacher relationships. As one teacher pointed out, "You don't want to be telling [parents] what to do, you don't want them to be thinking that you are telling them what to

do, because they would be resentful.” (T7) One teacher noted that this was a novel approach:

It just may not look like what we grew up with or what, through our teacher education programs, we were told it was supposed to look like, and just being really respectful about that ... just not the deficit model, these kids come with lots of neat things. (T8)

There was an understanding that an approach to the development of parent/ teacher relationships “is not an overnight thing [getting to know the parents], it is a painful process,” (T7), and that the process can be confusing for all concerned. “I have some parents who are really trying to understand [how their children are learning] and it is like... I don’t understand [how they help their children] either...where do we go?” (T7)

The teachers were concerned that the parents did not fully understand the importance of their role in helping children learn. As one teacher expressed it, “I don’t know if there is an understanding that they have a role, the importance of their role,” (T5) and another suggested why this might be the case, “I have had conversations with parents who really don’t think they have much to contribute... having them having more confidence in their own selves, we all have something to share.” (T8) The same teacher also suggested how the confidence of the parents could be increased when she said, “I think that what we have to do is to let the parents know that the things they are doing are worthwhile and valuable already, and I think we need to make the parents feel included and part of what we do here and that they are welcome any time.” (T7)

The teachers felt that their relationship with parents was strengthened by daily conversations and connections thus allowing the teachers the freedom to comment on children's learning. As one teacher noted, " We often have conversations with each other...like every day pretty much...and it is easy for me to tell the parents when I realize that there are a couple of things going on because we have already established a rapport."

(T8). Another teacher expressed that same idea when she stated,

What needs to come first is the trust in the relationship with the parents, that the parent feels that they know the teacher, the teacher knows the parents, that comfort level then as something comes up they can ask for ideas ... we can say, here is something we noticed that your child was struggling with, here's a way that you could maybe extend that at home in a fun way." (T7)

One teacher, commenting on how daily conversation had helped her build a relationship, said, "It was so simple, it didn't matter, he would say 'Hello, how are you?'" (T2) Asked about how she communicated with parents, one teacher answered, "What worked? That incidental kind of conversation that takes place as the day starts, as the day ends, you are hanging out at lunch-time,"(T3) and the Vice Principal commented that although "those conversations seem so fleeting, so passing, but they are so important, that is how we establish our connections."(T3) This casual conversation would be impossible for parents with limited English language proficiency and for those parents who "have the feeling that they should not interfere [in the classroom]."(T7)

One way teachers felt that parents learned more about how to support their children's literacy learning and gained confidence in their own skills was by being involved in programs where parents shared their ideas. As one teacher explained, " [Participation in

these programs] is also a chance for them to be meeting other families and interacting with other kids, grandma's and mums,"(T8) and this interaction "validates what they are already doing,"(T8) and "gives them trust that they have something to share."(T5)

Programs where parents and teachers meet and mix in informal ways can be very helpful in the exchange of ideas. As one teacher commented, "For me it comes back to different people, different personalities, and the different ideas they have, (T2) as such programs provide parents and teachers with "the opportunity to see the kinds of things that are happening in other peoples' homes in a non-threatening way."(T2)

The teachers understood that "The more families understand what school looks like and feels like and smells like, the better they are able to support it"(T7), and that, "Parallel communication, building that bridge, can't do anything but really support the children's learning success." (T2)

The ways that some teachers would like to support the development of parent/teacher relationships may be summarized as follows:

1. To learn more about the home literacy experiences of the children
2. To learn more about the values and mores of different cultures
3. To use a variety of different strategies in working with parents
4. To have a relationship with parents that is non-directive
5. To be able to base their conversations with parents on the parents' goals for their children

6. To have the time to hold daily conversations with parents in order to build relationships.

However, in order to achieve #5 and #6 above, the teachers need ready access to translation services.

These results indicate that in order to be able to support parents in helping their children learn, family literacy programs should be designed to enable teachers:

- to find out more about the cultural practices of families;
- to communicate with parents in a non- directive way.

Also, in order to develop more common understanding between parents and teachers, family literacy programs need to address the issues of the four sets of parents and of the teachers.

Drawing on the six ways that parents and teachers may gain greater shared understanding of how parents can support children's literacy learning, six questions can be formulated that would help teachers consider the degree to which Family Literacy programs support the development of the shared understanding that leads to improved parent/teacher communication. The six questions are:

1. Do parents see their children learning in new ways?
2. Can parents see their children learning?
3. Are parents helped to understand how the teachers are teaching?
4. Are parents made aware of the importance of their role?

5. Are teachers made more aware of the cultural practices in the home?
6. Are there any language barriers to parent/teacher communication?

These six questions create a framework of analysis that can be applied to family literacy programs in order to consider their potential in increasing parental understanding about their role in children's learning.

### **6. 3. Fostering common understanding: Summary**

The amount and type of common understanding that existed between parents and teachers in this study varied according to the beliefs of the parents. Differences in the beliefs held by the parents impacted on the type of information the parents needed from the teachers in order to be able to fulfill their roles. For all categories of parental beliefs, the traditional means of parent/teacher communication presented the parents with difficulties in getting the information they needed in order to be able to help their children learn.

The question was then asked, if traditional methods of parent/teacher communication are inadequate in helping the parents expand their understanding of how to help their children learn, what other ways could teachers use to help parents increase their understanding of their role? This question was addressed by looking at the comments of parents in the study who had expanded their perception of their role in helping their children learn and the comments of the teachers about how they wanted to develop parent/teacher relationships. The findings enabled the creation of a framework of analysis, consisting of six questions that could be applied to family literacy programs, as



a means of considering their potential in helping parents increase their understanding of their roles.

However, a word of caution is required at this point. These results apply only to the situation in this one school where the teachers believe that parents can best help their children learn by taking on the role of Nurturers. In other schools teachers may hold different views about the parents role in helping children learn.

In the next part of this chapter, I apply this six-question framework of analysis to the family literacy programs in the school, in order to consider their potential in creating the shared understanding necessary for the exchange of ideas and knowledge.

#### **6. 4. Issues with existing family literacy programs**

The third research question in this study was, “How can these findings, when applied to existing Family Literacy programs in the school, suggest how the programs may be adapted to increase the communication alignment between parents and teachers?” To address this question, the six questions that evolved from the second research question were applied to each of the family literacy programs previously described in this study. The application of this framework of analysis to each of these programs leads to an understanding of how adaptations and changes to the programs might increase the parents’ awareness of their role in children’s literacy development.

My application of the framework of analysis to each of the programs, based on parent and teacher responses to the original research questions, suggests some guidelines that teachers in the school could use when planning future family literacy initiatives to increase common understanding. Ideally, though, the teachers and parents who participated in the programs should have done the analysis. However, as the framework was developed after the data were collected, the following should be seen as an example of how the framework of analysis could be applied. Nevertheless, the parents and teachers may well have come to different conclusions, if they had answered directly the six questions in the framework of analysis.

#### **6. 4. 1. Books for Breakfast**

Aim of the program: to help parents understand the importance of reading to children, and provide them with ways to share books with their children.

##### *1. Do parents see their children learning in new ways?*

In showing parents that reading to and with children is important, this program may be presenting parents with an expanded view of their role in children's literacy learning. This aspect of the program may be especially important for parents who believe that their role is that of a Carer, who do not see reading to their children as part of their role in supporting their children's literacy development. However, although these parents might benefit from the aims of this program, there are significant reasons why these parents might not be able to take part in the program. Parents in this study who believe in their

role as a Carer often had very limited English language proficiency, and the books used in this program were written in English.

Those parents who believe in their role as Supporters, and believe that their role is to extend the work their children are doing in class, might want to know how reading with their child can help their literacy development, if the parents understand that the school attaches importance to this activity.

However, as results from this study showed, many of the parents already know and accept the importance this activity. Those parents who believe in their role as Developers appear to have understood the importance of reading with children. As one parent in this category commented, "We hear from birth how important it is to read with your child." (P24E) This program did not provide these parents with the type of information they felt they needed in order to help their children learn. It did not provide themj with specific information about their children's learning strengths or weaknesses, or with new ways of helping their children's literacy development. One teacher understood how resources could be wasted on people who did not need them when he explained how parents in his neighborhood "got this book, just a picture book ... and then there is this nice little resource package that goes home, [titled]'How to read to your kids' ... there's barely a family in that area, I would say no family in that area, that would need that." (T5) Parents who believe that their role is that of Nurturer will have been sharing books with their children as part of extending their children's awareness of the world, and they, like the parents who believe in their role as Supporter, will not need to be shown how to do this.

*2. Can parents see their children learning?*

The aim of this program is to develop parents' skill in sharing books with their children.

There is no attempt in this program to show parents how much their children have learned.

*3. Are parents helped to understand how the teachers are teaching?*

In some of these programs, teachers tried to explain how sharing books helped children's literacy development. They did this by displaying a list of the literacy development s that might take place when parents shared books with their children. However, this list was written in English, effectively excluding those parents with limited English language skills.

*4. Are parents made aware of the importance of their role?*

For those parents that believe that they can help their children learn by reading with them, this program has little new to offer. It might contribute to common understanding for those parents who see their role as that of Supporters and who may be unaware that they can use this activity to help their children learn. The timing of this program may make it difficult for some parents to stay and participate in the activities. One parent, who was aware of the program but did not participate in it, explained why. "I don't like being rushed in the morning ... I am already doing the fifteen minutes [shared reading in the classroom], and then [again], after school with [my children]." (P14E)

*5. Are teachers made more aware of cultural practices?*

There is no attempt to understand the different cultural practices of families.

*6. Are there language barriers to parent/teacher communication?*

It would be very difficult for a non-English speaking parent to either participate or learn from this program

This program, as it is conceived at present, seems to be able to do little to promote common understanding between parents and teachers. There is one group of parents for whom this program could increase common understanding, those who believe in their role as a Carer, but these parents appear to be excluded by their lack of proficiency in English, and their belief that it is the role of the school to help their children learn. This inability to develop common understanding between parents and teachers might have been a reason why teachers saw this program as being less successful than other programs in the school. The teachers were aware that there were difficulties with this program and had tried to adapt it to better meet the needs of the parents and children. These changes appeared to be effective as one teacher explained, "When we tried some new stuff, puppet plays and singing ... that was quite wonderful ... now it is on track."

(T4) It appears that, in order to make this program more effective in helping parents support their children's learning, the emphasis needed to be taken off reading books with children and on to presenting a range of learning opportunities that parents and teachers could share with their children.

#### 6. 4. 2. Games day

Aim of the program: to show parents how children learn through play.

##### *1. Do parents see their children learning in new ways?*

Parents who attend Games Day saw how the children's participation in playful activities provided them with learning opportunities. Comments from the teachers showed that this program might have helped parents gain an understanding of their influence:

I was surprised that I had parents that had made the time [to attend] because I know that they have busy schedules... we have 130 kids, or thereabouts, and I would say we had 50 to 60 parents come that morning... I feel that for those parents ... one in particular ... I feel that her presence in the [class] room has increased since that morning and ... she seems to have spent more time with us. (T10).

Both parents and children become involved in an enjoyable activity, based on artifacts brought from their own homes, and parents also had the opportunity to see how other parents interacted with their children. Lack of proficiency in English was not a barrier to the parents' participation in this program, as the children in the school acted as translators where necessary. Comments from one of the teachers indicated that the children "loved it, they loved teaching, they loved playing... they gained confidence in teaching and they gained confidence in playing." (T10) As noted earlier, changes in children's understanding of how they learn impacts on how families support their learning.

##### *2. Can parents see their children learning?*

The children were asked to produce written information about how to play the games and were able to demonstrate some of their writing skills. As the children had to explain to

the parents how the games were played, they also had the opportunity to demonstrate their language skills. While these activities did not demonstrate all the work the children were capable of producing, parents might have gained some awareness of the amount learning their children had achieved.

*3. Are parents helped to understand how teachers are teaching?*

As described by one teacher, the aims of the program was “want[ing] to bring play into the classroom... want[ing] to connect with the play activities that were happening at home, and have evidence of them in the classroom.”(T10) This program was contributing to making the invisible pedagogy of the classroom more visible by demonstrating to parents that play is a learning activity, and by validating the play activities of the home.

*4. Are parents made aware of the importance of their role?*

By showing parents that children learn through play, this program provided parents with validation that any play activities that were already taking place at home could increase their child’s learning, and provided those parents that did not allow their children to play at home with an incentive to do so.

*5. Are teachers made more aware of cultural practices?*

By asking the children to bring games from home and by involving parents in playing the games, the teachers were able to gain knowledge and information about different cultural practices.

*6. Are there any language barriers to parent/teacher communication?*

The teachers had provided translators from both outside and inside the school.

This program seems to have been successful in helping parents understand about how children learn, and providing parents with a way to help them learn. It also appeared to help teachers understand more about children's home life. The teachers expressed surprise about the number and variety of games the children brought to the classroom.

As one teacher commented, "We had no idea what we would get, the number of games, and we were just blown away ... there were games we had never seen before." (T10)

This program also seems to have encouraged children to be more socially interactive, and therefore more involved in literacy learning. One teacher described how this took place when she said, "As they saw the games the other children were bringing in, it started that conversation, 'Oh we've got to bring in a game'." (T10)

The teachers in the school ensured the success of the program by informing the parents about the date and time of the program well in advance. As one teacher commented, "The initial notice, asking the families to mark the date on the calendar ... I think that was four weeks ahead of time, because we wanted to give [the parents] time to move their schedules around as much as possible." (T10) The teachers also ensured that translation was available for those parents who needed it. They did this by enlisting the support of older, bi-lingual children. The teachers prepared the children in their classes by helping them understand how the games were played as well as how to teach the



parents about the games. The number of parents and family members who attended the program attested to the program's level of success.

#### **6. 4. 3. Mother Goose Drop-in Program**

Aim of the program: to involve parents in preschool children's learning,

##### *1. Do Parents see their children learning in new ways?*

Parents who participate in this program were shown how to involve their children in craft and singing activities. Comments from two mothers participating in the program indicated that, as a result of seeing how the teacher and children interacted when involved in activities, they had developed new ways of interacting with their children. One mother commented that, "Before, I used to yell at [my children], now I try to talk to them," (P8C), and another stated that, "This program gave me ideas [about what] we can do at home, instead of just working through her workbook." (P2C)

##### *2. Can parents see their children learning?*

This is a program for parents of preschool children so it was difficult to measure the children's learning by any formal standards. However, the parents appeared to understand that their children were learning. Through a translator one mother commented, "[Before coming to this program], [she] was not doing much at home, and after the programs [she] had learned many things she did not expect her to learn," (P5C) and that her daughter "[is] even singing at home and now, [and] says 'Let me do it, don't do it for me!'" [She is] more independent." (P5C)

*3. Are parents helped to understand how teachers are teaching?*

This aspect of the program is more difficult to assess, as there was little teaching that took place in this program. The children were supported in their learning by becoming involved in the different activities that had been placed on tables around the room. Parents and children were free to use these activities as they wished. The translator, a parent herself, reported that, "Growing up [we] were not as happy [in school]... [but] now their children are happy (learning)," (P2C) which seems to indicate that the parents understood that learning is taking place.

*4. Are parents made aware of the importance of their role?*

The parents in this program felt that it was important for them to learn English so that they could support their children's learning. They felt that, by learning English nursery rhymes and trying to talk to the program coordinator, they are learning to speak English. They also wanted their children to learn some English and, as one parent said, "Everybody say[s] if you want to learn English, follow the little children, [and] you learn!" (P3C)

*5. Are teachers made more aware of cultural practices?*

It is difficult to understand how teachers could learn more about the different cultural practices of the parents unless there was some form of exchange between parents and teachers.

*6. Are there language barriers to parent/teacher communication?*

Despite several parents in the program being bilingual it was often difficult for them to act as translators. The coordinator of this program expressed difficulty in communicating with parents with limited English language proficiency.

This program appeared to provide the parents of preschool children with insights into how they can help their children learn. It also helped to make the invisible teaching that takes place in kindergarten classrooms more apparent to the parents. As a result, these parents are less likely to be shocked by the ethos of classroom when their children start school.

While these parents wanted their children to learn English, it may have been possible to use the program to help them understand that using their first language with their children is an important aspect of helping children to learn. This might have been achieved by introducing into the program songs and stories in languages other than English. It might also have been possible to explain to the parents what their children were learning when they were involved in the activities in the room. This would require the use of bi-lingual parents to provide translation. As noted earlier, this might present some difficulties leading to misunderstanding and miscommunication, a situation that needs to be avoided.

**6. 4. 4. Home reading program**

Aim of the program: to increase children's reading ability by encouraging parents to hear their children read.

*1. Do parents see their children learning in new ways?*

Parents who are Supporters or Nurturers understand the importance of sharing books with their children and this program was be seen as an imposition on family time by one parent who noted that:

I found that the [home reading] programs were much slower than us and I would forget to sign [the record book]. I forget to do that because [reading together] has been such a standard in our house ... so for me to document everything he reads would take pages.....This assumption that you are required to spend 30 to 45 minutes of your evening reading ... sometimes we do not have that time for reading. [My child] has ten minutes to look at a magazine before she goes to bed. (P19E)

Teachers, aware of the imposition this program might place on some parents, had dropped the requirement that parents recorded what their children had read and one parent appeared to appreciate this change, when she stated:

“I love the way they do the home reading program here. I don’t want to record what I read to my child every day because ... I have a friend who has to do this, and she hates it, because it was difficult for her to find the time.” (P18E)

This same parent also objected to having to stop reading the books she and her child were enjoying and start to read the books her child brought home from school. She noted, “If I am reading Harry Potter, I am not going to stop to read a kid’s early reading book”, and continued, “This assumption that you have to read your children English books, for parents whose first language is not English ... what if you are reading some amazing folk tale or something [in your own language]?”(P18E)

For parents who believe in their role as Developers, this approach to helping their children read is accepted but it may not provide them with the kind of support they want. As one parent explained, "Reading is not homework! Reading you do for ten or fifteen minutes and that is it, but we need some other homework too." (15) She accepted the suggestion that she read with her child but it did little to change her approach to helping her child learn.

For those parents who believe in their role as Carers, many of the comments that apply to the Books for Breakfast program also apply to this program. If parents do not understand the need to read to children, the provision of books in a language they might not understand will not be welcome.

### *2. Can parents see their children's learning?*

In order for parents to see their children learning they must be aware of any reading progress that is taking place. If teachers ranked the home reading books by level of reading difficulty and let parents know about the ranking system, they might help parents understand the progress that their children are making. It was not clear whether or not this happens in the program, or even whether a system of ranking books according to level of reading difficulty fits into the teachers' philosophy of encouraging children to learn to read.

### *3. Are parents helped to understand how teachers are teaching?*

As teachers are not directly involved in this reading process, it is doubtful if this takes place.

*4. Are parents made aware of the importance of their role?*

Parental participation in this program might reinforce the role of the school in helping children learn to read, rather than providing parents with more awareness of how they influence children's learning. Parents in the study saw this program as a way of imposing schoolwork into the home learning situation. One parent, who believed in her role as a Developer, indicated the level of stress this might cause in the home, when she commented, "So [we read together] every night, unless she is really tired, and I am tired, then we leave it for the other day, but we try to read something every night, [something] which is from the school." (P22ESL) Other parents resent being expected to participate in the program and one declared that, "We are reading bag drop-outs!" (P15E) and continued by explaining, "My children get the home reading [from school], but we often forget about it, it stays at the bottom of the stairs." (P15E)

*5. Are teachers made more aware of different cultural practices?*

This program does not help teachers know more about the cultural practices of the home.

*6. Are there any language barriers to parent/teacher communication?*

There was little parent/teacher communication involved in this program.

This program seemed more focused on the teaching and learning that takes place in school than on helping parents develop their home literacy learning practices. This program might help those families where there are not many children's books in the home but might also limit the amount of environmental reading a child might participate in. For those families where there are many books in the home, this program was seen as an imposition on their family life and worked against the development of a partnership relationship with their child's teacher.

The teachers in this study had already adapted the program to meet what they perceived as the being the needs of families. They did not expect parents to record what they read with their children, or insist that children and parents read every night. As suggested by Blackledge (2000) and Cummins (2000), it may be possible to encourage parents with English as a second language to share books with their children if these books are written in their first language or were dual language books. This would require considerable expenditure by schools, as schools would need to provide books in the many different languages of their parent population. It may also be difficult to find such books.

#### **6. 4. 5. Literacy Fair**

Aim of the program: to demonstrate the literacy work of the children in the school.

##### *1. Do parents see their children learning in new ways?*

The aim of this program was to highlight the work of the children in the school. Some of the ways this work was presented might help parents understand the range of activities

that can lead to children learning, and that some of these activities are related to their everyday experiences in the home. For example, in one classroom the students were running a café complete with student-made newspaper and recipes of the cookies they had made. However, the teachers did not stress that these activities could be done at home and hence could support family literacy, and it is doubtful if the program had a great influence on the parents' perception of their role in helping children's literacy development.

## *2. Can parents see their children learning?*

Parents witnessing their children learn was the aim of this program, and it achieved it very well. The range and quality of children's work was on display and parents' comments indicated that they were pleased with what they saw. As one parent commented, "The Literacy Fair just gave me the 'warm fuzzies', to see what they are doing at different levels, and the confidence [the children demonstrated] ... did you see that photography project? That blew me away!"(P20ESL)

However, some parents may not understand the level of the work produced by the children, as the work was not graded in any way and often resulted from cooperative projects. For those parents who believed in their role as Developers, and who understand that children need self-confidence in order to learn, the day would have been a success.

## *3. Are parents helped to understand how teachers are teaching?*



Making any invisible teaching more visible may have taken place as a result of parents' understanding of the quality of the work on display. As one parent commented, "I thought it was fabulous, and I am trying to get the [children's] pictures published, they have to be published, we could do a calendar or something, there has got to be some documentation of the work." (P25E)

*4. Are parents made aware of the importance of their role?*

There is no evidence to show that this took place, but the enthusiasm the children showed in being part of this program may cross over into the lives of the families and encourage parents to engage in new ways of helping their children learn. However, it must be noted that while some of the children's learning was shown in different languages, the vast majority of the work was in English. It was difficult to understand how non-English speaking parents could participate in the activities. The Literacy Fair was very successful in providing some parents with an understanding of the work done in the school. It might have been less successful in helping some parents understand the level of their children's work or the way teachers helped children learn.

Notices, and examples of children's work in other languages, might have encouraged non-English speaking parents to attend this program. It may even be possible to use this program to present aspects of the different cultures of the families in the school by, for example, using recipes for ethnic food that are written and displayed in the parent's first language.

*5. Are teachers made more aware of different cultural practices?*

There is little opportunity for teachers to see the cultural practices of the home.

*6. Are there any language barriers to parent/teacher communication?*

Although parent/teacher communication was not the main purpose of this program the children acted as translators when required.

**6. 4. 6. Kindergarten Readiness Program**

Aim of the program: to show parents how they can prepare their children for Kindergarten.

*1. Do parents see their children learning in new ways?*

The principal of the school described how this morning program tried to make the parents more aware of their influence on their children's learning. As he explained, "[We show the parents how to] model ... how to sit down and read with the kids, how to ... count numbers,"(T12) and he continued, "(Giving) each kid a little package, with crayons and a book and some counters ... they will be on a roll, and they [will be] thinking about [doing] that kind of stuff at home." (T12)

*2. Can parents see their children learning?*

This is not the aim of this program for preschool children.

*3. Are parents helped to understand how teachers are teaching?*

During the morning the teachers, who were running the program, demonstrated how to read to young children and, when the children were out of the room having a snack, the teachers explained to the parents how this activity helped their children learn. For part of the morning, the children and parents were encouraged to participate in some of the activities that teachers had placed on the tables around the room. One teacher had made cards that had, on one side, suggestions about what children might do with the materials, and on the other, an explanation of what a child could learn by participating in the activity. At the end of the meeting the comments and questions from the parents indicated that they were trying to understand how the teachers were going to help their children learn. Most of the parents who attended this program had limited English skills and translation was provided.

*4. Are parents made aware of the importance of their role?*

By providing parents with resources to use at home, and explaining how and why the parents might use them, this program showed the parents that they could influence their children's learning, and provided them with the means of doing so. However, it is unlikely that in the space of one morning these parents would understand how the use of the materials could help their children learn, especially as the need for interpreters limited the amount of information teachers could share with the parents.

*5. Are teachers made more aware of the different cultural practices in the home?*

There is no way that the teachers could learn about the different cultural practices in the homes through this program.

*6. Are there any language barriers to parent/teacher communication?*

The teachers had arranged for two multicultural workers to attend this session to act as translators. However, they were not needed to facilitate communication between teachers and parents, because parents that attended either spoke English or did not ask questions. This program provided some parents of preschool children with an excellent introduction to the school. It allows them to get a glimpse of the teaching in the school, and provided them with resources they could use at home. However, this program only takes place once a year and for less than one full morning. A program such as this might be more beneficial to parents if it can be repeated throughout the first year their child is in school.

**6. 5. Family Literacy programs and the creation of common understanding**

The programs in the school were considered for their potential of increasing common understanding between teachers and parents by analysis through the following questions:

- Q1. Do parents see their children learning in new ways?
- Q2. Can parents see their children learning?
- Q3. Are parents helped to understand how the teachers are teaching?
- Q4. Are parents made more aware of their role?
- Q5. Are teachers made more aware of different cultural practices?
- Q6. Are there language barriers to parent/teacher communication?

Table 6 presents a summary of the findings.

Table 6

*Results of the analysis of family literacy programs in the school*

Question	1	2	3	4	5	6
Books for Breakfast	Lim	NRel	Lim	Lim	No	No
Games Day	Lim	Lim	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mother Goose Program	Yes	Lim	Yes	Yes	Lim	Lim
Home Reading	Lim	No	No	Lim	No	NRel
Literacy Fair	Lim	Lim	Lim	Lim	No	Lim
Kindergarten readiness	Lim	NRel	Lim	Lim	No	Lim

Lim = Limited NRel = Not relevant

Table 6 summarizes the findings of the analysis of the family literacy programs described in this study. Each program used in this study was analyzed and assessed in terms of the four areas that have been identified as supporting the development of common understanding between parents and teachers. By presenting the results in this way it is possible to compare the effectiveness of the programs and to determine the element of programs that may lead to successful outcomes.

Table 6 indicates that the programs that appear to be the most successful for all categories of parents are those that allow parents to be involved in their children's learning activities in an informal way (Games Day and Mother Goose Drop in Program). Parents attending these programs were not asked to learn any specific skills to use when helping their

children learn and were able to enjoy time with their children. As the school Principal commented, "[Parents] will come [to the school] for Sports day, or for a trip, but for academic things whatever [the] reason, they don't want to make the time to come." (T12) The Principal indicated that the parents would come to the school for certain events. He noted, "When we have a Lunar New Year Festival we have seven hundred people and there is food [piled] up the walls!" (T12) The provision of food seems to be an important part of successful parent/teacher communication. One English-speaking parent described that she felt that the non-English speaking parents tried to be supportive of the school and they did this by providing food for the classroom on their child's birthday and other special occasions.

The two family literacy programs that aimed to help parents read to their children (Home Reading, Books for Breakfast) appeared to be less successful in bridging the gap between parents and teachers. These programs might have contributed to any lack of common understanding between parents and teachers by presenting parents with home learning practices that the parents either did not value, or were not able to support.

It was apparent from the way the teachers had adapted some of these programs that the teachers appeared to be aware of which programs are successful and which need modifying. Both the Home Reading program and the Books for Breakfast program had undergone adaptations by teachers in order to make them more suitable for parents. As one teacher explained, "I think for some groups [Family Literacy programs] are way more significant than for other groups." (T2)

## **6. 6. Chapter summary**

The comparison of the parents' and teachers' beliefs about parents' role in helping children's literacy development indicated that there were differences in the amount, and type, of common understanding between different categories of parents and the teachers in the school. The different levels of common understanding that existed between the teachers and parents in this study lead to a range of issues relating to parent/teacher communication.

By looking at the comments of the small number of parents who demonstrated that they had changed their approach to helping their children learn, a framework of analysis was created that, when applied to the family literacy programs within the school, showed which of the programs increased the level of common understanding between parents and teachers and indicated that some of the programs were more successful in achieving their goal than others. Using the framework of analysis also led to suggestions about how the family literacy programs might be adapted in ways that would create more common understanding between parents and teachers. An examination of the attributes of the more successful programs showed that those programs that use an informal, family centered, non-educative approach with parents appear to be the most successful in developing common understanding between teachers and parents.

## **CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The discussion of the results of this study is based upon the research questions raised in Chapter One:

- 1) What beliefs and expectations do parents and teachers hold about a parent's role in children's early literacy development?
- 2) What, if any, are the common areas of understanding between parents and teachers that may be used to promote the development of effective parent/teacher partnerships?
- 3) How can the family literacy programs in the school be adapted to increase communication alignment between parents and teachers?

### **7.1. General observations**

The data from this study confirm the finding of several earlier studies that indicate that there are differences between parents' and teachers' perceptions about the parental role in children's literacy development (Windrass & Nunes, 2003; Cairney & Ruge 1997; Hannon, 1990) and among different parent groups. Results indicate that, in the particular school chosen for this research, there are four sets of beliefs about the parental roles in helping children's literacy development. The beliefs of the parents belonged



predominantly to the first three categories of Carer, Supporter and Developer, and the beliefs of the teachers belonged predominantly to the fourth category, Nurturer.

The data from this study confirm that the parents' and teachers' beliefs are closely related to past experiences with schooling, formal or informal training, and culturally appropriate notions of who helps children learn. The parents' beliefs about their role in helping their children learn are colored by past experiences of schooling, and the teachers' beliefs about parental roles are based mainly on training and dialogue with colleagues. These findings confirm the work of Bastiani (1993) and of Atkins and Bastiani (1988). Tett (2000) also shows how parents and teachers have different perceptions about their roles and suggests ways that common understanding may be developed (see later discussion). This research also reflects the work of Lareau and Shumar (1996) who stated that parents bring to the classroom beliefs about learning and parent/teacher relationships that are culturally based, and that reflect the values and mores of the society in which they grew up.

The finding that parents are often unsure about how to help their children learn and that they often sent children to tutors as a way of supporting the children's learning is similar to the findings of Hannon and Janes (1990). These researchers also found that parents used a phonetic approach in helping their children learn to read, an approach that many of the parents in this study also used.

The teachers in this study understood that the parents had an important role in their children's literacy learning and that the parents were supporting literacy learning in several different ways and, although some teachers had reservations about how some parents were helping their children, others felt that any help the parents could provide would be useful. This finding differs from that of Linek et al. (1997), who found that teachers did not appear to think that the parents were qualified to help their children learn.

The data also confirm research by Huss-Keeler (1997) that showed how differences between the teachers' and the parents' beliefs led to miscommunication and misunderstanding between teachers and parents from minority ethnic backgrounds, and highlights the need for parents and teachers to have some common understanding of the parental roles in children's literacy development (Alterman, 2005; Sainsbury, 1992).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued that not all children start with the same kind or level of cultural capital and that incongruity between the home and school learning experiences of children might impede children's learning. Data from this study confirm that families from different ethnicities have different amounts of cultural capital leading to difficulties in the development of parent/teacher relationships.

The parents in this study prepared their children to enter school in different ways. Parents with a more Western approach to helping their children learn tended to prepare children for school by teaching letter names and sounds while those from different backgrounds

took a more care-giving approach, as reported by McNaughton (2001). The data from this study diverged somewhat from work by Early and Gunderson (1993), who found that teachers related lack of preschool book experiences with poor school performance, as the teachers in this study equated apparent lack of language skills with concerns about a child's learning, and one teacher suggested that a child's lack of shared reading experiences could be quickly overcome by immersion in the classroom environment.

Other data from this study support the need to make invisible teaching more visible so that it can be understood. The teachers in this study wanted to know more about the children's learning experiences in the home and the parents wanted to know more about children's learning in the classroom. This finding supports Bernstein's (1975) suggestion that teachers need to make their teaching more visible, and need a pedagogical framework that illuminates what the parents are doing with their children. Parents may not be aware of the impact of daily activities on children's learning and therefore are not able to tell teachers about these activities. The importance of teachers finding ways to understand home literacy practices is supported by the work of Kendrick and Mackay (2004), where drawings by children of their home literacy activities allowed teachers to gain a better understanding of the home literary experiences of the children.

## **7. 2. Factors that influence beliefs about parental roles in children's literacy development**

One of the most striking findings of this study was how closely the parents' beliefs about parental roles in children's literacy development were colored by their past experiences

of schooling. This finding implied that either parents were not aware of new advances in teaching or had rejected them. The parents that had tried to adopt new ways of helping their children learn seemed to acquire their awareness of different teaching approaches from knowledgeable family members or snatched conversations with teachers, rather than from participation in family literacy programs. Despite teachers' efforts to provide parents with ways of helping their children learn, it appeared that the parents' home literacy practices relied mainly on their own experiences of schooling or advice from friends and family. A few parents commented that they had received support in helping their children learn from their child's teacher, a resource that only those parents who spoke English had access to. One parent used his negative experience of schooling to ensure that his child's educational experiences were different from his own. Most of the parents accepted that teaching had changed since they were at school, but many of these parents appeared to have no understanding of how or why teaching had changed. The reliance of the parents in this study on past experiences indicates both the wealth of knowledge in families (Moll et al., 1992) and the lack of communication between teachers and parents about new ways of teaching.

Teachers in this study based their beliefs on how parents could help their children's literacy development on their experiences of child rearing and on knowledge gleaned from either their initial training as a teacher, or their ongoing professional training. What appeared to be exceptional about the teachers in the school was the level of consensus among the teachers about how children become literate, and about how parents can support their children's literacy development. The teachers in the school had,

through many meetings, developed, and adopted, a school-wide philosophy about the parental role in children's learning. This, according to Bernstein (2000), is one of the necessary conditions for helping parents become aware of the invisible teaching that takes place in the school. However, the school's philosophy may, in fact, not provide a full account of the explicit type of letter sounds, sound blending, and word recognition skills that occurred in the context of their "whole language" meaning-based philosophy of teaching.

Data from this study show that the beliefs of a few parents belong to more than one category. These parents are developing an understanding of different ways to help their children. Teachers need to understand that parents may have beliefs in their role in helping their children's literacy development that belong to more than one category and that they need to be aware of possible differences among groups of parents as well as between groups of parents. This need to understand how every parent supports their child's learning reinforces Edwards' (2004) comments about the difficulties of using a model of family literacy programs based on incorporation, as this model relies on teachers taking the time to learn more about families and this would detract from their time with the children in their classes.

Differences in the teachers' and parents' basis of beliefs about the parental roles in helping children learn support the need for the development of shared understanding, or intersubjectivity, that will allow parents and teachers to communicate as described by Alterman (2005) and Matusov (1996).

### **7. 3. Barriers to shared understanding between parents and teachers**

The literature points to four areas where they may be barriers to shared understanding between parents and teachers: concepts of literacy; concepts of family; understandings of how children learn; and power. I now address each of these issues and note how data from this study either confirms or diverges from the literature.

#### **7. 3. 1. Literacy**

Parent and teachers' beliefs about what constitutes literacy were positioned along a continuum between literacy as autonomous, a set of skills to be learned, and literacy as ideological, or socially constructed (Street, 1991). Although both parents and teachers were involved in both types of literacy, individual comments were framed around a concept of literacy that belonged predominantly to a specific stance along the continuum rather than embracing the whole of the continuum thus implying that some experiences of literacy may not be recognized.

The data from this study confirm research that shows that parents hold a range of beliefs about what constitutes literacy (Cairney, 1997; Hannon, 1990) and that these beliefs differed from those of the teachers. The parents' beliefs about literacy tended to emphasize the skill aspect of literacy and literacy learning. Many of the parents in the study either wanted their children to concentrate on grammar and vocabulary in order to develop their literacy, or they wanted to ensure that their children had "the basics", such as letter sounds and names and spelling skills. This belief that children become literate by learning the skills required for reading and writing has been termed the autonomous

approach to literacy learning (Street, 1991). Although, in this study, it was the parents from ethnic minorities that subscribed to this belief more than the Canadian parents, a phonics based approach to literacy learning has been used for many years, and continues to be used, in North American elementary schools, and many parents from Western cultures believe that this is the best way to help children learn to read and write. The popularity of this approach to literacy learning may be deduced from the number of literacy programs such as "Open Court" ([www.needleworkspictures.com/ocr/](http://www.needleworkspictures.com/ocr/)) that are used in schools today and this phonetic approach to literacy learning is at the core of the "No Child Left Behind" U. S. national literacy program. Even those parents who appeared open to children developing literacy in more emergent ways were concerned that their children learned phonics and phonetics. This finding appears to confirm the findings of Anderson (1994), that parents, despite saying they believed in a perspective of emergent literacy, were concerned about their children's spelling skills.

While it appeared from the data that many of the parents considered that literacy was a set of skills, and wanted their children to learn this set of skills, it was apparent that parents also engaged in literacy activities in the home that were socially structured. The families were engaged in a variety of work and pleasure-related activities that indicated that the families had funds of knowledge that they were sharing with their children (Moll et al. 1992). For example, many of the immigrant parents work in restaurants, or run small businesses, and their children are exposed to the literacy activities that are embedded in the contexts of these situations. However, the parents appeared to be

unaware that their children's participation in these socially framed literacy activities might contribute to their children's literacy learning.

Teachers, on the other hand, believed that literacy is socially constructed (New London Group, 1996; Street, 1991) and in their classroom present project work as a way of developing literacy skills. Within this structure, teachers helped children learn literacy skills such as grammar and spelling, but this aspect of a child's literacy learning was not emphasized in the teachers' conversations or communication with parents. As a result, the parents did not understand that, in fact, the form of literacy learning they wanted their children to experience was taking place in the classroom. Two parents commented that the school was letting their children down by not teaching them the literacy skills the parents thought their children needed, and that they alone had taught their children to read.

Results from this study show that there was a mismatch between what the parents wanted to learn and what the teachers wanted them to learn. The information parents wanted from teachers related to how to teach their children letter names and sounds, and recognize words as an aid to developing reading skills; on the other hand, teachers wanted to tell parents how to increase their child's vocabulary and provide them with life experiences that could be used as a basis for communication and meaning making. What is apparent from this study is that both parents and teachers were helping children's literacy development using both a skills based *and* a socially constructed approach to literacy development, and it was the lack of awareness of what the other was doing that



lead to misunderstanding and misinformation. The parents' lack of awareness that their daily activities contributed to their children's learning and the teachers' lack of emphasis in their communication with parents on the literacy skills they were teaching children prevented them in their communicating in ways that could mutually support children's literacy learning.

Lankshear and Knobel (2003) described the approach to literacy learning that emphasized encoding and decoding text as one that is grounded in psychology, and Hull and Schultz (2002) state that this approach still dominates much of children's early schooling. Data from this study indicate that, for many parents, this is the approach to literacy learning that they know and understand and that they are reluctant to adopt a different approach completely, if at all. How the parental roles are defined is related to issues of identity and experience (Anderson, 1995; Brooker, 2002). Li (2006) discusses how the roles of school and the roles of home are constantly renegotiated and redefined in the struggle between the issues of majority versus minority, traditional versus progressive, and dominance versus resistance. Li states that with the increasing diversity in classrooms and communities the dominance of one paradigm is no longer possible or acceptable and suggests that, rather than seeing the conflict between roles they need to be seen as complimentary and that by working together parents and teachers can create the change necessary to provide children with the education they need.

### **7.3.2. Family**

Data from this study support the literature that shows that family members often take an active role in supporting children's literacy development (Kendrick & McKay, 2004;

Williams & Gregory, 2001). The parents in this study reported that siblings, grandparents, uncles and friends all helped their children at some time. Nor was this help provided in only one language. As Olmeda (2004) reported, extended family members often helped children in their first language, but this type of support was rarely acknowledged.

The teachers too seemed aware that family members other than mothers were involved in home literacy activities and tried to arrange some family literacy activities in which all family members could participate. Theoretically, all the school-based family literacy programs were open to all family members, but the timing of some of the programs meant that it was mainly the mothers who could attend.

One school-based family literacy activity in the school, Games Day, had been successful in encouraging all family members to attend, demonstrating that there may be a need to create a space where children can bring their families, a third space such as that described by Pahl (2005) where children, teachers and family members can interact.

This study also supports work by Anderson (1995) and Ran (2000) that shows that families support children's literacy learning according to culturally appropriate norms. The Chinese-Canadian and Vietnamese-Canadian parents in this study supported a more didactic approach to literacy learning than the Euro-Canadian and Canadian parents. The teachers wanted children to ask questions and participate in classroom discussion, but

may not have realized that some children might have been told by parents to sit quietly in class and not to question the teacher - as also described by Brooker (2002).

Parents who believed in their role as Developers adopted school-like activities as a way of helping their children learn, a finding that reflects the work of Webster and Feiler (1998), and suggests, as the data show, that these parents obtained information about how to help their children's literacy development, either from the school or from previous training.

Although many family members may be involved in helping children learn, in those families where one parent has better English language skills than the other, the children may only get specific help from that parent, thus reducing the supportive effect of the whole family. The use of different languages within the school setting, as described by Cummins (2001), may help parents understand that helping children in their first language is as important as helping them in English.

### **7. 3. 3. How children learn**

The data from the study confirm the literature that showed that different cultures have different ways of becoming literate (Gee, 2001; McNaughton, 1995). The cultural differences between the parents and teachers, and among the parents, had a large influence on beliefs about how children become literate. In this study, beliefs about parental roles in children's literacy development were related to different cultural ways of being and understanding. The parents who were Carers and Supporters came from ethnic

backgrounds with an underlying philosophy of collectivism; parents who were Developers and Nurturers came from the mainstream Western culture where there is an underlying philosophy of individualism.

While this study showed that different beliefs in parental roles were related to cultural differences, it must be remembered that this was a small-scale study in a specific school with parents from specific ethnic groups. These results may not be applicable to other schools with parents from a different range of ethnic groups. Nor is this categorization of parental beliefs directly related to specific cultures. It may vary within cultures according to social class; for example, traditionally, wealthy parents in England may see their role as that of a Carer. They may send their children away to be educated, rather than becoming involved in their children's education, or employed a governess to teach their children. Parents from many different cultures might want to keep the role of the teacher and the parent separate, in order not to create added stress on the parent-child relationship (Janes and Kermani, 2001).

One aspect of cultural difference that was highlighted in this study was the difficulties created when parents and teachers did not share the same language. Nine parents in the study had very limited proficiency with the English language and were unable to talk directly to teachers about their children's learning. The school did what they could to help these parents by providing interpreters whenever possible and asking bilingual children or parents to help when official translation was not available. It is interesting to note that in this study the teachers did not consider the language differences to be as

important to parent/teacher communication as the parents did. Future studies may wish to explore the differences in the parents' and teachers' perception of the importance of the differences in language.

#### **7. 3. 4. Power in home school relationships**

The literature presents issues of power in home/school relationships in two ways. One way power is depicted is that of political, social and institutional power, the power of the educational system to set pedagogy, direct learning, impose restrictions and set societal directions. This is the kind of power that Delpit (1988) discusses in relation to how black children are discriminated against in the U.S. school system. The parents in this study felt that they had no power to alter the educational system even if they disagreed with it. This became apparent during a short exchange with a parent as I was thanking a group of parents for taking part in this study. This parent had expressed concerns about his child's education and I suggested that he make his concerns known to the teachers. He responded by saying that he was hoping that I would do so as he did not feel that he had the power to express his thoughts directly.

Teachers, too, may feel that they have very limited power to change things in the educational system. The teachers in this school had taken the extraordinary step of having the school designated as an alternate school in an attempt to teach the way they felt was the best way to help children learn. The teachers often expressed their frustration at not being able to work with parents the way they wanted to because of time and curricular constraints and many of the teachers were spending extra hours trying to

support parental involvement in children's education and as a result becoming burned out and sick.

The second aspect to power relations in home/school relationships relates to agency, the teachers' and parents' ability to help children learn. Both the teachers and the parents expressed frustration at how lack of effective communication about home and school learning practices and contexts limited their ability to understand what and how children were learning.

Both parents and teachers believed that it was the other who had the agency to help children learn. The parents believed that it was the teachers who had the authority to decide how and what their children were taught and to control parent/teacher meetings and exchange of information. The teachers believed that parents could influence how well their children learned, and could, by choosing whether or not to attend school meetings, decide the nature of the parent/teacher relationship.

The home/school relationships between teachers and parents differed according to the parental roles. Parents who were Carers expected teachers to control how and what their children were learning but felt that they had little power to question the system. Carers were reluctant to participate in school activities, and were often excluded from meeting teachers because of language barriers. This lack of a shared language resulted in these parents having only a superficial relationship with the teachers, a situation described by Cummins (2000).

The parents who believed in their role as Supporters and Developers had a more balanced relationship with the teachers, as they were able to meet the teachers and talk to them, but they too felt that the teachers held the balance of power, as they had limited access to the teachers because the teachers were busy and the parents did not want to disturb them. Parents in these two categories often felt that they were powerless to help their children learn because they did not know what their children were doing in the classroom.

The one parent who believed in his role as a Nurturer might be expected to have a relationship reflecting equality with teachers as this parent shared the beliefs of the teachers and had opted to send his child to the school. However, this was not the case. While he stated that the parent/teacher relationship should be like a marriage he regretted the lack of information about his child's learning that came from the school. This parent suggested that the school might use a web site to provide parents with the information they needed.

The relationship between the parents and the teachers in this study reflected the parents' beliefs that the teachers had more knowledge in, and experience of, teaching children. This led to the parents not being aware of the amount of learning experiences that were taking place in the home. Parents who believed in their role as Supporters and Developers, believing that school type learning activities superceded home learning activities, tried to use what they perceived as school-like activities in the home, a finding that confirms work done by Marsh (2003).

The parents' lack of awareness of how the richness of their daily lives could help their children learn also contributed to the teacher's lack of knowledge about the literacy practices in the home. If the parents did not value the activities they were doing with their children they were hardly likely to share information about them with their child's teacher.

Teachers also thought that parents had the power to influence their children's language development. They expected parents to dialogue with their children as a means of providing children with an approach to language that would allow children to ask questions and participate in discussions. The teachers' perception that many parents did not help their children develop language skills was based on a lack of awareness of the different cultural practices of using language in the home and with children. As the Vietnamese multicultural worker explained, in Vietnam the parents do not expect to have to tailor how they use language in the home to meet their children's language skills; parents take a more top down approach, and expect their children to listen and learn how to use language. Cultural differences in how children are expected to talk to adults might prevent children demonstrating their language skills and lead to teachers underestimating their abilities.

The teachers might also have confused the children's reticence to use their developing English language skills as indicating that the children had little language experience in the home (Tabors, 1991). The teachers also believed that the parents influenced



children's self-esteem and confidence in their learning, and went to great lengths to try to ensure that the parents did not reprimand children for poor work.

Teachers believed that the parents had the power to influence children's learning in ways that would support their role as teachers. This belief reflects the views of Aurebach (1995) who suggests that the parent/teacher relationship is based on the teachers' desire to make their jobs easier. The teachers in this study believed that parents could provide their children with rich learning experiences that could be used in the classroom as a basis for the development of a child's critical thinking skills and social interaction. The rich life experiences that the teachers valued, library visits, walking in the park, and meeting friends, were based on their own ways of being in the world, and did not reflect the variety of ways of being in the world that many of the children encountered. Apart from one teacher in the study, these teachers were not fully aware of the rich life experiences of many of the children in their class (Taylor, 1997).

It is not possible to determine from the data whether this is because the teachers did not design pedagogical spaces in which the children were encouraged to share information from home, but from classroom visits, this does not seem like a complete understanding of a complex situation. It is possible that, while the teachers did afford spaces for the children to share, even young children have begun to make judgments about what "knowledge" has "capital" in classrooms and see knowledge from home as inappropriate or of limited use in Western schooling. The data from this study also confirms the work

of Gunderson and Anderson (2003), who described the different relationships of power between teachers and parents from different ethnic backgrounds.

This imbalance of power, or agency, between teachers and parents affects the development of their relationship. Teachers may be encouraged to find some way of giving up their real or perceived power in order to create a partnership with parents that allows for the free flow of information and ideas that can support the development of shared understanding. However, the educational system is not set up in a way that supports teachers sharing their power with parents. It seems that at some stage in the development of educational systems schools became to be recognized as being the only places where children learn rather than as just one of the many contexts where children learn. This acceptance that children learn more in schools than in other situations gives the schools a tremendous position of power whether or not they want or accept it. Within this institutional framework teachers and parents appear to be limited in how they can build relationships of shared power and therefore harness the skills and expertise of both parents and teachers in helping children learn.

#### **7.3.5. Communication**

An overriding theme from the data collected in this study was the lack of effective communication between parents and teachers, school and home. Both the parents and the teachers in this study expressed difficulty in communicating about children's learning and how parents could support their learning. The most obvious barrier to communication resulted from the lack of a common language. Teachers would try to

ensure that interpreters were available but, as the Principal stated, it was increasingly difficult to get translators, and their allotment of time to each school was very limited (an example of how institutional power limited teachers trying to work with parents). This meant that there were very few times when minority language parents could expect to be able to discuss their children's education with the teachers. As has been explained above, the school employed several ways to provide parents with interpreters when they were needed. However, such provision was far from ideal, both for the parents and the school. These non-English speaking parents might be unwilling to share concerns or intimate details of her child's learning when there was another child present, and the teachers could not be sure that the children acting as interpreters fully understood what was being said, and had the experience and knowledge to translate fully. This meant that parents and teachers could only communicate on a superficial level.

The direct translation of language was not the only way that a second language was a barrier to communication. Different cultures used language in different ways and this lead to miscommunication and confusion for some parents. As Snow (1983) stated, it is relatively easy to communicate face to face, even if one person is not sure of the conventions of the language being used, as facial and other gestures add to the overall message, but when the reader does not know the conventions of written language, it is much more difficult for the reader to discern the meaning. When parents were reading report cards, or having them translated, the language conventions used by the teachers caused misunderstanding for parents from the Philippines as, in their culture, a positive

opening statement negates later negative statements. Parents did not understand from the report cards that their children were experiencing learning difficulties.

Communication difficulties also took place between parents and teachers whose first language was English. These occurred when teachers used words that the parents either did not understand or understood in a different way than the teachers. This finding confirms the work of Epstein (1998) who noted that the same word could mean different things to parents and teachers. What this study showed was that sometimes teachers had to use words or phrases they did not fully understand themselves. It is difficult to see how parents are expected to understand the report cards when the teachers were not always entirely sure what they meant.

This study showed that another barrier to communication between parents and teachers was an issue of timing. The parents wanted to know as soon as the teachers thought that their children were having learning difficulties so that they could provide their children with extra support. The teachers were more inclined to give children time to develop and learn before reporting learning difficulties to the parents. This meant that the first time parents learned that their children were having any learning difficulties was at parent/teacher conferences late in the school year or in the end of year report cards. One parent in the study expressed surprise on learning his child had not been learning as well as he expected, and suggested that the late information from the teachers suggested that they did not understand his child's learning needs and were not prepared to address them.

The data showed that both parents and teachers were unhappy with traditional methods of home/school communication. Parents often found report cards difficult to understand, and were concerned that they did not provide the information they needed about their child's learning. Anecdotal report cards did not allow parents to understand whether their child had successfully completed a grade or not. For those parents who could not ask the teacher directly because of language differences, this was very confusing and frustrating.

Teachers, on the other hand, may not want to use grades in report cards because the teachers may be unsure what the grades represent. As one teacher commented, did the grades signify the effort a child put into their work, their level of work relative to other children in the class, the child's level of work measured against preset norms, the child's progress or a mix of all of these issues? If teachers are not sure what grades on report cards signify, how are parents expected to understand what they mean?

Data from this study demonstrate that parents and teachers had limited communication during student-led parent/teacher conferences. The parents felt that they had been involved in their children's work, did not need to have it explained to them again by their child, and wanted time to talk to the teacher without their child being there. One parent really liked the student-led parent/teacher conferences because of the way her child was allowed to take control of the situation. This parent often had direct contact with her child's teacher and mentioned that that was how she learned how her child was progressing so she may not have needed the same information from the parent/teacher conference as the other parents.

Teachers, too, felt constrained by the structure of the conferences. They wanted more time to talk to the parents and felt that because there were often several parents in the room at the same time they were restricted in what they could say to parents. Teachers spent enormous amounts of time and energy in writing report cards and in preparing for student led conferences. The teachers helped the students prepare their work for their parents to see, and rehearsed the children in how to present their work to their parents. It is ironic then that both the report cards and the student-led parent/teacher conferences had been structured in ways that were meant to encourage communication between parents and teachers, yet they appeared to have very limited success.

One way that parents who were Carers and parents who were Supporters wanted the teachers to communicate with them was by providing their children with the kind of homework that allowed the parents to gain an awareness of what their children were doing in school. Parents wanted this homework to be marked by the teacher as a way of helping the children know whether or not they had understood the work they were expected to do. While parents who believed in their role as Carers and Supporters wanted homework, there were differences in their reasons for this. Both categories of parents wanted to know what work their children were doing in class but the parents who believed in their role as Carers also wanted their children to have homework so that their children could spend their evenings productively, and by ensuring that their children did their homework they could keep their children safe from perceived dangers in the community. Parents who believed in their role as Supporters, on the other hand, wanted their children to have homework so they could understand what work the children were

doing relative to the curriculum, and they could go and get their children the resources they needed to support this work. The effects of these differences of belief led to an apparent lack of shared understanding between parents and teachers. This lack of shared understanding led to difficulties of communication between parents and teachers, which in turn, appeared to lead to a lack of trust in what teachers and parents were doing to help children learn and a lack of parental confidence in their ability to help children learn.

The next section looks at what the data showed about how these differences in common understanding might be bridged.

#### **7. 4. The effects of differences on shared understanding**

An initial look at the data in this study gives the impression that parents and teachers have little shared understanding about the parental roles in helping children's literacy development. However, a more careful consideration of the results indicates that the situation is not as obvious as it first appears.

Both parents and teachers are actively engaged in helping children learn in many different ways. Observations in the classroom showed that the teachers were helping young children develop literacy learning skills, such as letter names and sounds, spelling and grammar, skills that many of the parents wanted to see their children learn.

Comments from the parents showed that they were unaware of the many ways they were helping their children learn. No parents in the study commented on how language use in the home or daily living experiences contributed to their children's learning, yet it is

impossible to believe that children did not benefit from these experiences. Parents were providing their children with rich life experiences and language development, but these were unreported by the parents and not well recognized by the teachers. The parents' lack of awareness of the many literacy-learning experiences they were giving their children speaks to the need for a shared space in which both teachers and parents can come to see things anew and develop mutual trust and understanding.

The tragedy of the situation that exists between parents and teachers in this school is that there was much more shared understanding than appears to be the case. Both parents and teachers were involved in helping children learn in a variety of ways that complimented each other. The parents were, through their daily activities, doing what the teachers hoped they would do to help their children learn. They were providing their children with experiences and language opportunities even though they might not have understood that this was a way of helping their children. The teachers were largely unaware of the range of experiences the children were having and so were unable to make use of them in the classroom.

Teachers were providing children with the direct teaching of literacy skills that the parents valued but because this was not done in a formal, directed manner the parents were not aware that this teaching was taking place. It appears that the parents and teachers were like "ships passing in the night", both unaware of what the other was doing despite the closeness of their goals, ideals and practices. Only when the invisible learning that was taking place in both home and school contexts is made visible will



teachers and parents be able to develop some shared understanding of children's educational experiences that will allow them to communicate effectively for the benefit of the children in their care.

### **7. 5. How might awareness about shared understanding between teacher and parents be increased?**

As the data in Chapter 6 indicate, an awareness of the shared understanding that exists between teachers and parents might be increased in six ways:

- parents understanding how well their children are learning;
- parents seeing their children learning in new ways;
- parents understanding how and what the teachers are teaching;
- parents becoming more aware of the importance of their role in helping children learn;
- teachers becoming more aware of the literacy practices of the homes;
- overcoming language barriers between parents and teachers.

Parents and teachers need to develop the kind of open relationship where both the visible and invisible literacy practices of the home and the school may become more apparent.

Teachers and parents need to build a relationship of trust, one in which both parents and teachers have confidence in their ability to work together for the benefit of children's learning.

Data from this study indicates that the type of parent/teacher interaction where parents, teachers and children interact in ways that allow them to develop trust and begin to open themselves up to one another. Reviewing these issues, it is apparent that they are prerequisites to effective family literacy programs rather than attributes of individual programs. The question then becomes: how can parents and teachers ensure that these six circumstances take place within their child's educational setting?

I suggest that what is required is a change in the way parents and teachers interact. Parents and teachers might be encouraged to interact in ways that allow for the development of the level of trust and mutual respect that will allow them to exchange the kind of information necessary for shared understanding. This interaction can take place in an atmosphere of relaxed, mutual support, and fun.

The teachers in the school already participate in the kind of activities that support the development of trust and respect, for example sharing food and play activities. As the Principal noted, parents would come to the school "in droves" for events such as Sports Day and would be "packing the hallways" when they were invited to bring and share food, but it appears that these activities are not regarded by teachers as ways of helping parents supporting their children learn, and therefore the amount of time and effort that teachers expend on the preparation of these activities is somehow seen as less important than the time and effort they spend on developing and presenting family literacy

programs. I would argue that it is these very activities that start to build the shared understanding that help ensure that family literacy programs are successful.

## **7. 6. Implications**

This research illuminates many critical aspects of how the relationship between parents and teachers may be changed to benefit young children's literacy development. Although based on a small sample of parents and teachers, drawn from a particular school setting, this study presents an additional perspective on how parent/teacher interactions promote collaboration around children's literacy development. The study suggests that, before parents and teachers can communicate in ways that allow for an exchange of ideas and knowledge, they need to develop the kind of relationship that engenders mutual trust and that leads to confidence in both their own and the others' abilities to help children learn. Parents and teachers might want to engage in the kind of democratic dialogue in which social bridging and knowledge flows can occur around their respective values, beliefs, practices and events.

### **7. 6. 1. Implications for teachers**

Before parents and teachers can develop the shared understanding needed for an exchange of ideas and knowledge, teachers could change how they interact with parents.

*From formal to informal interactions with parents*

Teachers could change the emphasis about how they meet parents. At present, it appears that teachers may value, or are expected to value, the more traditional formal and structured ways of interacting with parents such as in parent/teacher conferences and parent association meetings. It may be that the only slightly less structured meeting teachers have with parents are when parents are asked to visit the school to discuss their child's poor behavior or some other problem. A major feature of these kinds of parent/teacher interactions is teachers giving parents information rather than sharing information.

As results from this study show, it is during less formal and minimally structured parent/teacher interaction that parents and teachers have a greater opportunity to interact in ways that facilitate the sharing of ideas. When the teachers in this school invited parents to share fun activities, such as participating in Games Day or Sports Day, and to watch their child perform in a play or a review, that the parents and other family members felt relaxed and confident enough to visit the school in large numbers. The teachers might not think that they are providing the parents with information about their child's learning, but the parents are being offered the opportunity to see what their children can do and to feel the ethos of the teaching and learning situation in a way that more formal interaction might not afford.

In order to build some shared understanding teachers could concentrate on providing parents with interaction that involves all family members in ways that enable a shared understanding of each others practices. Replacing the more formal, structured approach

that is often part of the more traditional parent/teacher interactions, with a less formal, more free ranging approach releases teachers from the responsibility of creating and presenting the kind of structured, directive programs, such as some of the family literacy programs, that take so much of their time and effort for seemingly so little gain. Teachers will be able to direct more of their energy towards interacting with parents in ways that build the trust and mutual respect that will form the strong base on which communication about school and schooling may take place.

#### *More effective communication with parents*

As results from this study show, the ways that teachers communicate with parents, such as anecdotal report cards and student-led parent/teacher conferences satisfy neither the parents nor the teachers as an effective means of communication about children's literacy development. All parents in this study wanted to know in a more timely way if, and when, their children were experiencing learning difficulties and struggled with the language used in report cards. Teachers, for the best of reasons, seemed unsure about the best time to inform parents of concerns about a child's progress and they too struggled to understand the meaning of the phrases they were directed to use in the report cards.

Teachers worked hard to train students to lead the parent/teacher conferences and thereby to reflect the philosophy of the school, but in doing so, prevented many parents from both obtaining the information they wanted about their child's progress, and limited opportunities for parents to express their concerns.

Most of the parents in this study wanted direct, clear information about their child's ability in relation to his or her peers, and to know both what the school was doing to help their child learn, and what support they could give their child to improve their learning. While parents are concerned about their child's happiness, self-confidence, and attitude to learning, this information is of secondary importance when trying to understand more about their child's learning and schooling. Parents may make decisions about helping their children based on incomplete information, and these decisions might or might not support the work of the school. It may even be said that teachers are indirectly supporting alternative forms of education, such as private tutoring businesses and the purchase of children's workbooks, by not providing parents with the amount and type of information parents need to understand how to support their child's literacy development.

However, it must be noted that teachers, even if they wish to change the way they provide parents with information, are limited in what they can do. They are legislated to provide certain types of information, and even to use certain phrases, phrases that neither they nor the parents fully understand. Teachers are also regulated as to when, and how often, they communicate formally with parents, and while this does not stop some teachers from interacting with parents in other ways and at other times, this legislation does send a message that this might be the maximum amount of parent/teacher interaction that is necessary to provide parents with the information they need.

*Making pedagogy more visible*

Parents struggle to understand what, and how, their children are learning. For instance, when young children are engaged in play activities in the classroom, some parents assume that children are not learning, and they may also consider that the lack of regular homework is a device to limit the teacher's workload rather than a pedagogical decision.

Teachers, immersed in pedagogy and the stress of the daily, immediate situations that occur in any school, may be unaware that parents do not know, or understand, what and how their children are learning. The parents in this study were aware that teaching practices had changed since they were in school, and that the teaching practices of this country are very different from those of their country of origin, but they have very limited ways of knowing how and why things are different. Even the parents who shared a common language and culture with the teachers got most of their information about teaching and learning from friends and family, rather than from the school.

Teachers in this school had gone some way to providing parents with opportunities to see how children were learning and all the teachers had an open door policy that allowed parents to enter the classrooms at any time. Unfortunately, many of the parents did not feel able to take advantage of this, either because they were working during the day or because of language issues. It seems that teachers need to find additional ways of helping parents understand how they teach, and how children learn.

The Games Day that teachers presented was an excellent way of combining a demonstration of teaching and learning with informal parent/teacher interaction that was

centered on family, food and fun. The evening theater performances, where many extended family members enjoyed seeing children represent the work they had been doing, at a time that families could attend, were also an excellent way of highlighting the work of the school.

In this study it was notable that the teachers were involved in many activities that helped parents understand the pedagogical philosophy of the school. It was also apparent that teachers were spending inordinate amounts of time and energy on creating both formal and informal parent/teacher interactions. The results from this study suggest that it is the informal interactions that produce the results both teachers and parents desire, and teachers, by directing their efforts more to these types of interactions and less to the type of interactions that are more formally structured, will achieve more of the shared understanding that both teacher and parents want.

Teachers, rather than advising parents on how to help their children learn, might create the kind of interactive activities in the school where parents and teachers can meet on equal terms and get to know one another. Data from this study suggest ways that this type of interaction may be encouraged:

- teachers could become actively to involve the dual languages of their children in the classroom work. Cummins (2001) describes the importance of respecting other languages and Parke et al. (2002) describe how children use both languages to help them learn;



- teachers could find time to talk with parents in an informal way. They could initiate the kind of informal conversations that help parents and teachers learn to trust each other;
- teachers could brainstorm ways of communicating with parents who do not speak English. Although it might not be possible to have ready access to translators, it may be possible to have leaflets and notices translated into different languages;
- teachers might display children's work that had been done in different languages, thus not only acknowledging that children used more than one language but indicating that literacy development takes place in all languages;
- teachers could find ways to show parents how they teach and to explain why they are teaching in this way;
- for many of these activities, teachers are dependent on the parents coming into the school. As a result schools must find ways to make the school environment as welcoming and as open as possible to parents. I am reminded of the teachers who provided coffee for parents, only to be told by a multicultural worker that Chinese parents preferred tea;
- teachers could be open to learning more about the different cultures of the families in the school. As data from this study shows, this can be achieved by meeting the parents in a non-threatening, enjoyable environment and by sharing food.

### **7. 6. 2. Implications for school administrators**

Although teachers may be able to do several things that allow them to work with parents in a different way, they need the support of the school administration. Principals and vice-principals need to help teachers find ways to encourage the kind of parent/teacher relationship that leads to parents and teachers getting to know more about each other's learning practices and cultural experiences.

Administrators could create a space where parents and teachers can meet and mingle in informal ways. However, my experience has shown that provision of this space alone may not be enough to ensure the kind of contact between teachers and parents that leads to the development of trust. There has to be someone in charge of this space, creating the situations where parents can meet to discuss their concerns and where parents and teachers can meet on equal terms.

As well as opening up the school setting and making it a welcoming place for the parents to visit, schools could be open to the surrounding community. The Principal could support the development of partnerships between organizations in the community and the teachers in the school. This would allow teachers to learn more about the lives of their children.

There is also a prerequisite for administrators to encourage the use of different languages in the school, to help the school become a more multilingual place in which children can learn. Cummins (2001) describes the power of letting children use their first language to

help them learn. In order for this to happen, teachers may need help and advice on how they can work with many different languages in their class. Instances of the power of this approach may be seen in case studies by Diane Potts and Sarah Cohen on the Multiliteracies project website ([www.multiliteracies.ca](http://www.multiliteracies.ca)).

### **7. 6. 3. Implications for Parents**

This study shows that teachers could work towards changing the type of relationship that they have with parents and this has implications for the parents. Once parents are more aware of how their children are being taught they automatically assume more agency in helping their children learn. Parents will no longer be able to say that they are not given the kind of information they need to make good educational decisions for their children and may assume a more equal role in helping their children learn. In this way parents are taking on more responsibility in their children's education, something the teachers in the study say they want to happen but which they might find difficult to accept.

As noted earlier in this study, intersubjectivity, or shared understanding, does not imply agreement, and providing parents with more information about children's learning might lead to discussions and disagreements. It is outside the scope of this study to address this issue, but it is difficult to understand how such disagreements and open discussions can be detrimental to children's learning, and such discussions might lead to better shared understanding in ways that are not possible at present.

#### **7. 6. 4. Implications for Parent Teacher Associations**

The four parents in this study who were members of the Parent Teacher Association wanted to know how to attract more parents and parents from ethnic minorities to be involved in the decision-making about the school direction. It is difficult to understand how parents can be expected to participate in such activities when they do not understand what teachers are doing and why.

Results from this study imply that Parent Teacher Associations have an important role to play in supporting teachers in making the pedagogical philosophy of the school more apparent to the different groups of parents in the school. They may do this by opting to support any informal parent/teacher interactions proposed by the teachers or by holding their own informal interactions with parents. An important aspect of these interactions will be the provision of translation. Members of Parent Teacher Associations have access to power in ways that individual parents, and teachers, do not. They may use this power to advocate for the provision of more resources for translation at meetings.

#### **7. 6. 5. Implications for School Boards**

Schools cannot be expected to create the kind of relationship with parents that lead to the development of trust and awareness of shared understanding without the support of the leaders in the school district. August and Hakuta (1997) cited in Cummins (2000) describe the attributes of schools and classrooms that lead to the kind of pedagogy that encourages students to analyze and understand the social realities of their lives and the

communities in which they live. Among these are the use of a balanced curriculum that incorporates both basic and higher order skills, opportunities for student directed activities, and staff development in understanding how to work with students with more than one language. Another way schools can work with bilingual students was by encouraging parent involvement through strong home/school communication. To facilitate this it may be necessary to employ a more representative population of teachers for multicultural schools, teachers who can speak more than one language. School Boards and Universities should go out of their way to recruit teachers from a variety of cultures into the profession.

One of the main barriers to parent/teacher communication resulted from the language differences that existed between the teachers and the parents. The parents, who had limited English language ability, felt unable to communicate with the teachers in the school. The school Principal felt unable to provide the amount and type of translation that he felt the parents needed. Although schools might be able to provide some interpretations services, they should not be expected to provide enough to fulfill all the needs of the parents and the teachers in the school. This appears to be a something that the school district needs to address by either providing schools with more access to translation services or providing schools with the money to employ their own translators.

The school district can also support teachers' efforts to reach out to parents by providing a list of resources that teachers can use with parents. These resources might include access to on-line dual language books, or information about the educational backgrounds

of different cultures and how this might reflect on parent/teacher relationships. Another way leaders in the school district could help teachers understand the need for creating a relationship of trust with parents is by providing teachers with in-service training in how to work with parents. This in-service training could help teachers understand the need to work with parents, some of the issues they might face in trying to do this, and some of the ways they could overcome these issues.

#### **7. 6. 6. The benefits of using intermediaries.**

This study demonstrates the important role played by multicultural workers in mediating understanding between ethnic communities and teachers from the mainstream culture. With their knowledge of the situations and life experiences of families and of the educational system, multicultural workers are in a unique position to know how parents can be helped to understand and adjust to new circumstances. These workers have a “foot in both worlds”, and are able to negotiate meaning across cultures. Their role as intermediaries between the home and school, parents and teachers, helps prevent misunderstandings and miscommunication. Multicultural workers are able to explain to parents from different cultures what their children are doing and why, and also help them with the life skills they need to become part of a new society.

Many multicultural workers already meet informally with groups of parents to discuss their concerns. Schools, with support from the school district, need to support more of these meetings, to encourage parents to enter the school on their own terms. With support and training multicultural workers will become more able to explain educational

concepts, as well as provide the kind of translation that bridges the gap between the parent's concept of education and the Canadian educational system.

With appropriate training, multicultural workers may also be able to provide teachers with workshops on the experiences and beliefs of parents from different ethnic backgrounds, including the home learning context. In this way teachers may be able to learn about the family life of the children in their care without having to impose either on families themselves, or on the time they spend teaching. These workshops then could help teachers and multicultural workers better define the different ways they can work with parents.

But data from this study show that there is also a need for mediation between parents from the mainstream culture and the schools. Parents from the mainstream also require the services of an intermediary who can bridge the gap between home and school, someone who can provide support to both parents and teachers in ways that encourage home/school interactions and shared understanding. This person would have knowledge and awareness about how parents from the mainstream culture help their children learn, as well as knowledge of how the school system works.

#### **7. 6. 7. Implications for the presentation of Family Literacy programs**

The data in this study indicated that the type of parent/teacher interaction that promotes shared understanding needs to be informal and centered on family, food and fun, and that teacher time and effort is better spent on family centered activities around classroom

activities rather than designing and presenting formal Family Literacy programs for parents. This is not meant to imply that directed programs do not have a purpose in helping parents help their children learn, but rather that the teachers' time and energy is best spent on other things, and that there is a requirement to have someone other than teachers to present these programs when the parents request them.

Data from this study imply that this role could be taken over by trained consultants or outside specialists who have an understanding of the kind of programs needed by the parents and who have expertise in how such programs might be presented in order to be effective. For instance, the "pyramid" model, using an expert in family literacy, might be useful when parents want access to specific skills and information, and the "quilt" model may be used, using a skilled moderator, when parents and teachers are seeking to find some kind of consensus over an issue.

#### **7. 6. 8. Implications for universities**

School districts can provide in-service training for teachers they already employ, but it might be a challenge to change the attitudes of established teachers solely through in-service training. However, universities can help new teachers understand some of the issues of working with parents. Universities can help new students understand the importance of working with parents and provide them with information about developing suitable parent/teacher interactions and the implications that result from this. Thus, if suitably trained, young teachers entering the workforce will be able to create the changes



that are required. Universities could also put more emphasis on recruiting bi-lingual, multicultural students to work in inner city schools.

#### **7. 6. 9. Comments on these implications**

I have outlined the implications for some of the stakeholders but it may be that something more is required. While it is possible to help teachers understand the ways that they can create a relationship of trust with parents, they may need help in understanding the hidden issues behind the creation of this relationship. The teachers might require the support of a trained facilitator who understands the issues that are faced by teachers as they try to create the relationship with parents that supports children's learning. Such a facilitator would enable teachers to clarify their concerns, and make what has become invisible to them, visible and able to be used to support children's learning.

#### **7. 7. Limitations of the study**

While this study has added to the understanding of how parents and teachers can work together by increasing the amount of common understanding that exists between them, it must be remembered that this is a very small study, based in a particular school, serving a specific multicultural population. The school has been designated an alternate school within the local school board, and this allows it greater freedom of choice in how it develops its relationship with parents. The teachers in the school are dedicated to helping parents become more involved with their children's education, regularly hold meetings to discuss this issue, and have a common and well thought-out philosophy of how to help children learn.

The parents who participated in the study were chosen because of their interest in working with the teachers in the school, in helping their children learn, and in developing better home/school communication. In different settings, where parents and teachers come from different ethnic backgrounds, there may be many more types of belief in the parental role in helping children learn, and in such contexts, different ways of communicating with parents and creating common understanding will be needed.

There are also limitations to the recommendations in this study as they have resource implications for school boards. There may be other ways to address the issues raised by this study however, exploration of other ways is beyond this research.

#### **7. 8. Significance of the study and implications for further research**

At a theoretical level this study has highlighted the need for an understanding of intersubjectivity when trying to people together in a way that allows for an exchange of ideas and knowledge. It has demonstrated that different types of family literacy programs may only be successful when there is a common, shared understanding that allows people to understand the issues under consideration and provides a basis on which communication may take place. This study demonstrates that without this shared understanding miscommunication and misunderstandings take place between teachers and parents. By demonstrating this requirement for shared understanding before effective communication can take place this study has added to the body of work looking at the effectiveness of different approaches to the delivery of family literacy programs.

At a research level this study shows that there is a prerequisite to build trust before engaging in social practices. Until a level of trust exists between parents and the teachers it is difficult to understand how and why they might collaborate to help children's literacy development.

The study indicates some ways in which this level of trust may be developed. By becoming involved in experiential learning across and between cultures parents and teachers come to know and understand each other in ways that encourage the development of trust between them.

This study, while shedding some light on issues of parent/teacher relationships, has generated more questions than it has addressed. It may be that there are more beliefs than were found in this study. In other schools, parents may have different beliefs about their role in helping their children learn from the four categories identified in this study. The comparison of teacher and parental beliefs is based on a situation where all the teachers interviewed subscribed to the same belief in how parents can help their children learn. They had achieved this consensus through discussion about the educational philosophy of the school. Teachers in other schools may not have had the opportunity to develop this level of consensus and thus may hold a wider range of beliefs in the parental role. It is therefore, important that the beliefs of teachers and parents in different school settings are explored in order to expand or refute these findings.

The second and third parts of the study are based on analysis of the original data linked with observations made in the school setting. As such the results may be seen as one step removed from the data. The assumptions made by this evaluation need exploring more directly. Questions such as what does any lack of common understanding between teachers and parents imply for home/school communication and how are parent and teacher beliefs in the parental role changed need addressing. This study suggests six questions that may be used to consider potential effectiveness of existing family literacy programs in one particular but there may be more, that are equally or more appropriate in other settings.

The finding that there are different beliefs about the parental role implies that parents may need different types of family literacy programs, programs that help them understand more about how they can help their children learn based, not on the beliefs of the teachers or program presenters about their role, but on parent's beliefs about their role and how they can be linked to those of the teachers. The role of intermediaries appears to be crucial in creating common understanding between parents and teachers in a multicultural school. Further research needs to be carried out in order to understand more about the role of the multicultural worker in mediating home and school communication and understanding.

### **7. 9. Personal reflections**

I embarked on this research to find out why teachers and parents found it so difficult to collaborate to help children's literacy learning when both teachers and parents wanted

this to happen. I have been both disheartened by my growing awareness of the complexity of the issues, and uplifted by the willingness of both teachers and parents to continue their efforts to work together. I hope that, in a small way, this research provides teachers and parents with the encouragement and support in their efforts to work together to help children learn.

I would like to end the report of this research by referring to comments made by an educational consultant on multicultural issues who presented an overview of the situation. She stressed that relationships are built up step by step, and take time to achieve and that, "It is going to take a generation of adaptation before we are going to see some of the things we purport to want." (SS3) This consultant referred to educators wanting change to happen immediately but explained that, "It is going to be the children who have gone through the system, and who think back to their own experiences," (SS3) who are the ones who will be going to school meetings, because they will have lived the Canadian school experience and understand it. However, it might not take a generational change before better parent/teacher interactions take place if parents and teachers understand the importance of these interactions and how they can be fostered. Changes can be made, but they have to be made slowly and carefully. As the speech and language consultant stated, "We had huge goals! We were going to move into literacy and talk about books, well, we didn't get there!" (SS2) She found that it took "a lot of opportunities [for parents and teachers] to see things a little differently" (SS2) for changes to take place. It is my hope that the results of this research contribute to opportunities for change.

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Appendix 1

Phase 1 Interview Protocol

## **From Literacy to Multiliteracies**

### **Interview Protocol - Parents**

1. What literacy activities do you and your child participate in at home?
  - What do you and your child like to do together?
  - Do you read to/with your child? When? What?
  - What language(s) do you speak/read?
  - What language do you and other family members usually use when you talk to your child? Do you ever use an additional language? When?
  - Have you ever used dual language books? How?
  - What kinds of things does your child see you reading? See other people in your house reading? [Prompts may include mail, instruction manuals, TV guides, etc..]
  - Do you ever watch TV or movies with your child? Are any of them adapted from classic children's stories – either English or the child's home language/culture? Do you talk to your child about what you've seen? What kinds of things do you talk about? Examples.
  - Do you play "reading games" with your child? i.e. spotting letters on signs, matching signs to items in the store, "I spy" games, etc.
  - Do you engage your child in oral storytelling? The retelling of family stories? Family stories about school? Expressions of parental values associated with school and learning? Ways in which parents support the importance of education?
  - How do other adults (i.e. grandparents, caregivers) in your child's life engage them in literacy activities?
2. What did you learn from the program/teacher meeting/demonstration?
  - Why did you enroll in this program? What did you want to learn?
  - Did the program meet your expectations? Why or why not?
  - Is it easier now to participate with your child in reading-related activities?
  - Will you alter what you do with your child as a result of what you learned? What will you do differently?
  - What did you find helpful/unhelpful about the program?
  - How could the school make it easier for you to participate in such programs?
  - Will you come again? Why/why not?
  - What would you say to other parents who were deciding whether or not to participate in similar programs?
3. Who helps your child with their schoolwork? Why?

4. Is it easy for you to contact the school?

- How do you hear about events for parents at your child's school?
- How would you like to be informed?
- What can the school do to help you get involved with your child's learning?
- What determines whether or not you can involve yourself in home-school activities – time of day, childcare, length of session, amount of notice, work schedule, transportation, etc.?

5. Would you please tell me how your child uses the computer to learn?

Appendix 2  
Transcription Protocol

## **Transcript Conventions**

### **1. Participants in the study**

**P** - indicates a parent (P1 – P25)

**C** - indicates a parent who communicated in Chinese

**V** - indicates a parent who communicated in Vietnamese

**E** – indicates a parent who communicated in English and whose first language is English

**ESL** – indicates a parent who communicated in English but whose first language was other than English

**T** indicates a teacher (T1-T13)

**SS** indicates educational support staff

**SS1-SS2**= Multicultural Workers

**SS3** = Speech and Language Consultant

**SS4**= English as a Second Language Consultant

**SS5**= Family Literacy Program Coordinator

**2. [ ]** Words inserted for clarity of Meaning

**3. ( )** denotes words used ungrammatically

**3. ...** Words, within an utterance, deleted for clarity of meaning

**4. !** denotes emphasis

**6. Period:** Terminal falling intonation

**5. Question mark (?)** =rising intonation.

Appendix 3

Data Analysis Node Summary

# Node Summary Report

**Project:** parental roles in literacy learning

**Generated:** 30/04/2007 2:40 PM

Culture		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	0
Created	29/06/2006 11:51 AM	Paragraphs Coded	0
Modified	29/06/2006 11:51 AM	Coding References	0
		Sources Coded	0
		Cases Coded	0

Culture\experience of schooling		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	2,332
Created	29/06/2006 11:52 AM	Paragraphs Coded	55
Modified	07/07/2006 12:45 PM	Coding References	32
		Sources Coded	6
		Cases Coded	5

Culture\issues		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	3,300
Created	29/06/2006 1:08 PM	Paragraphs Coded	52
Modified	17/07/2006 1:01 PM	Coding References	44
		Sources Coded	12
		Cases Coded	11

Culture\language		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	4,919
Created	29/06/2006 11:52 AM	Paragraphs Coded	131
Modified	17/07/2006 12:14 PM	Coding References	81
		Sources Coded	17
		Cases Coded	15

English and relationship		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	61,500
Created	20/07/2006 12:02 PM	Paragraphs Coded	2,678
Modified	30/04/2007 2:25 PM	Coding References	17
		Sources Coded	17
		Cases Coded	27



English lang and participation		Tree Node	
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Nickname		Words Coded	61,500
Created	20/07/2006 11:58 AM	Paragraphs Coded	2,678
Modified	30/04/2007 2:25 PM	Coding References	17
		Sources Coded	17
		Cases Coded	27

Family		Tree Node	
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Nickname		Words Coded	1,036
Created	29/06/2006 11:53 AM	Paragraphs Coded	45
Modified	17/07/2006 12:16 PM	Coding References	31
		Sources Coded	13
		Cases Coded	10

Family\concept of a parental role		Tree Node	
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Nickname		Words Coded	5,714
Created	04/07/2006 11:13 AM	Paragraphs Coded	149
Modified	17/07/2006 12:33 PM	Coding References	117
		Sources Coded	14
		Cases Coded	11

Family\concept of a parental role\first schooling		Tree Node	
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Nickname		Words Coded	662
Created	29/06/2006 11:53 AM	Paragraphs Coded	13
Modified	07/07/2006 9:55 AM	Coding References	14
		Sources Coded	4
		Cases Coded	4

Family\concept of a parental role\general		Tree Node	
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Nickname		Words Coded	111
Created	14/07/2006 11:27 AM	Paragraphs Coded	2
Modified	17/07/2006 12:08 PM	Coding References	2
		Sources Coded	2
		Cases Coded	0

Family\concept of a parental role\origins		Tree Node	
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Nickname		Words Coded	0
Created	14/07/2006 11:27 AM	Paragraphs Coded	0
Modified	11/07/2006 1:34 PM	Coding References	0
		Sources Coded	0
		Cases Coded	0

Literacy		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	2
Created	22/06/2006 11:47 AM	Paragraphs Coded	1
Modified	29/06/2006 11:31 AM	Coding References	1
		Sources Coded	1
		Cases Coded	27

Literacy\concepts of literacy		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	3,666
Created	22/06/2006 11:47 AM	Paragraphs Coded	80
Modified	11/07/2006 2:17 PM	Coding References	69
		Sources Coded	16
		Cases Coded	27

Literacy\concepts of literacy\concerns		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	356
Created	29/06/2006 11:50 AM	Paragraphs Coded	13
Modified	04/07/2006 1:38 PM	Coding References	9
		Sources Coded	5
		Cases Coded	5

Literacy\concepts of literacy\origins		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	1,130
Created	29/06/2006 11:48 AM	Paragraphs Coded	24
Modified	07/07/2006 11:19 AM	Coding References	24
		Sources Coded	6
		Cases Coded	6

Literacy\literacy development		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	80
Created	29/06/2006 11:48 AM	Paragraphs Coded	3
Modified	05/07/2006 1:26 PM	Coding References	1
		Sources Coded	1
		Cases Coded	1

Literacy\literacy development\ideas about learning		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	2,496
Created	14/07/2006 11:37 AM	Paragraphs Coded	47
Modified	17/07/2006 12:35 PM	Coding References	36
		Sources Coded	13
		Cases Coded	11

## Appendix 4

Samples of the comments under the nodes

**Name:** CEMc by Literacy concepts [relationship to child = educator, Tree  
Nodes\Literacy\concepts of literacy]

<Documents\First study\teachers\B> - § 1 reference coded [6.18% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 6.18% Coverage

a lot of the older kids would sit in the front hall and do crafts with the younger kids and there is modeling and language development so there were still benefits to be had just not the ones I had anticipated or had hoped for.

<Documents\First study\teachers\M> - § 1 reference coded [2.95% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.95% Coverage

M. I think we are going to see not literacy in a sense of just reading, it is literacy in the sense of school readiness, as well, everything around – singing, artistic lit musical lit working with print in diff ways, oral language, movement drama dance

Not everything is focused around books – the b for b is not just about reading, the teachers are the reading with the kids now and the older children do puppetry, craft, rhymes, language pattern games.

<Documents\Main study\teachers\Interview teachers 1> - § 16 references coded [18.31% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.06% Coverage

J. The first thing that comes to mind for me is that ... parents talking with their children and that oral communication, building language and concepts during discussion and conversation, and within that, underneath that, that it happens in a child's first language.

Reference 2 - 1.15% Coverage

P. So you want the discussion in their first language?

J. Absolutely, so that concepts are developed around what makes weather or cooking or all of those things that happen, you know, within the day, that children are able to develop those concepts and make those language connections.

Reference 3 - 2.17% Coverage

Name: CEMc by lit 2 [relationship to child = caregiver, Tree Nodes ~~literacy~~ literacy development/parent strategies]

<Documents\First study\Parents\Drop in mum ( 2)> - § 1 reference coded [4.62% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 4.62% Coverage

M. At home we do home schooling – different workbooks to color: I tell her which colors to use and which items to color. She has been practicing her printing and her numbers.

<Documents\First study\Parents\Drp in mum> - § 1 reference coded [4.14% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 4.14% Coverage

the mum points out which animal and ask if her child knows the name.

<Documents\Main study\Parents\ > - § 16 references coded [13.66% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.66% Coverage

What we do is we sit down, we get the books and we learn every day. The odd day we will miss it otherwise we will sit, we read books.

Reference 2 - 1.58% Coverage

B. Not a specific time, it can be seven or eight but we have got a dining table where we sit and study. Sometimes we try reading in the bedroom but it doesn't work out. The kids know that if we are sitting at that table we are going to do something, so we do math, we do English we do writing, reading we do everything.

Reference 3 - 0.27% Coverage

P. Do you set this work for the kids?

B. I do it.

Reference 4 - 0.98% Coverage

since I really didn't go to the school system here it is different for me so what I end up doing is I go to the stores, buying some books and we have a whole bunch of books and we practice on

family

- demo

argues

uf 1

<Documents\First study\Parents\Drp in mum> - § 3 references coded [10.21% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.28% Coverage

Grandma bought the book for the child.

Reference 2 - 4.38% Coverage

J. Grandma teaches her to use scissors, they do puzzles and draw pictures

Reference 3 - 3.54% Coverage

J. Uncle is always holding m and playing computer together.

<Documents\Main study\Parents> ≥ - § 3 references coded [2.92% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.44% Coverage

. How old are your children?

B. He is in grade three and my daughter is in grade 1.

Reference 2 - 1.31% Coverage

Who lives in your household?

B. My mother-in law, my father in law, my husband, me, and my kids. We work shifts so either my husband or myself is at home. My in laws help look after the kids, not teach them or anything. We are home altogether in the evening.

Reference 3 - 1.17% Coverage

my daughter, I don't know where she learned to read but she started learning in preschool, she is such a good reader and she is in Grade 1.

P. Had you been helping her at home?

B. I used to teach my son and she just picked it up.

Name: CEMc b [redacted] [relationship to child = caregiver, Tree Nodes\Family\concept of a parental role] *Family*

<Documents\First study\Parents\Drp in mum> - § 3 references coded [10.21% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.28% Coverage

Grandma bought the book for the child.

Reference 2 - 4.38% Coverage

J. Grandma teaches her to use scissors, they do puzzles and draw pictures

Reference 3 - 3.54% Coverage

J. Uncle is always holding m and playing computer together.

<Documents\Main study\Parents\ \_\_\_\_ > - § 20 references coded [20.02% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.44% Coverage

. How old are your children?

B. He is in grade three and my daughter is in grade 1.

Reference 2 - 0.53% Coverage

B. I went to school in India, my children were born here, they have been in this school since Kindergarten.

Reference 3 - 1.38% Coverage

B. Because if you watch the news kids do things like at 12 and 13 that are unbelievable and if you compare it to back home when I was going to school, I know there is going to be a big change now, but it is not going to be that traumatic like we have seen here, that is the reason.

Reference 4 - 1.31% Coverage

Who lives in your household?

Name: CEMc by ~~Culture~~ [relationship to child = caregiver, Tree Nodes\Culture\issues]

<Documents\Main study\Parents\ Culture > - § 4 references coded [7.54% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.68% Coverage

What did you think of the system when you first out your children in school?

B. Oh I was afraid! I was thinking I was going to take them back home but then I said no, they need to learn the system here they need the language they need everything and when they started this school I knew it was a good school so I said they would stay.

Reference 2 - 1.62% Coverage

B. In India I like being where they have uniforms, there is less bullying and teachers have authority. In India you could fail a kid. If it is not a smart kid t hey will f ail that kid and he could be out of school and parent take t he responsibility, if the kid is not going to study parents are going to say he has to stay home

Reference 3 - 0.44% Coverage

That is why I feel comfortable with the system in India because I have been through it,

Reference 4 - 3.80% Coverage

The culture here is completely different I still respect my parents but I have seen kids here the way they talk to their parents you shake your head and you wonder what 's the matter with you and when someone sees something for so long they think it is normal, whatever they see on TV they think that is a normal life and they try to act it out because to them that is the only thing. So I am trying to teach my kids both cultures and then they can choose whichever they want to, there is no guarantee but in the end you have to say that you tried, I have seen families saying that they didn't try, I should have done this, I should have gone back. When you come here you need money too so you have to work hard but sometimes you have to give up something to gain something.

<Documents\Main study\Parents\ > - § 2 references coded [2.15% Coverage]



**Name:** Family\concept of a parental role

<Documents\First study\Parents\P2C> - § 3 references coded [10.21% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.28% Coverage

Grandma bought the book for the child.

Reference 2 - 4.38% Coverage

J. Grandma teaches her to use scissors, they do puzzles and draw pictures

Reference 3 - 3.54% Coverage

J. Uncle is always holding m and playing computer together.

<Documents\First study\Parents\P4C> - § 1 reference coded [5.40% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 5.40% Coverage

S. Sometimes I read to them and I ask their sister and brother to read to them.

<Documents\Main study\Other\SS1> - § 14 references coded [15.78% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.53% Coverage

P. he parents don't take the responsibility to teach the children, the children have the responsibility to ask the parents because if they don't do the homework they might get spanked, they might get the zero mark, they might get different kinds of things they don't like because that goes into the report card and then the report card comes home monthly, every month. Sand then we don't do A,B,C (Grades)for example in a class of forty students we are placed from the first to the fortieth.

Reference 2 - 1.36% Coverage

D. Yes, but over there in order for the child to have an easier time and to have a better mark parents send the students to the same teacher who teaches you during the day for that teacher to make some extra money. It is very different from here, we don't talk about it, actually it is

**Name:** Culture\experience of schooling

<Documents\Main study\Other\SS1> - § 8 references coded [11.57% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.94% Coverage

- P. What about young children. preschool children, children in the early years of schooling how do parents help them?
- D. Basically I don't see much help over there because back home, for example when we start school we are given something to study at home, like the alphabet to learn, simple words to learn...

Reference 2 - 1.58% Coverage

- Q. No the teachers give us those for the children to learn and we have till the next morning to get called, each one of us gets called, to recite back to the teachers whether or not we have learned it by heart, learned the words, so in a class where we have many students, probably thirty or forty, no never thirty! It would be forty, fifty, sixty, so you are called randomly and then you have to go and bring your book and then stand beside the teacher and you start reading to see if you studied the night before.

Reference 3 - 3.71% Coverage

- R. he parents don't take the responsibility to teach the children, the children have the responsibility to ask the parents because if they don't do the homework they might get spanked, they might get the zero mark, they might get different kinds of things they don't like because that goes into the report card and then the report card comes home monthly, every month. Sand then we don't do A,B,C (Grades)for example in a class of forty students we are placed from the first to the fortieth.

P. Every month?

- D. Every month ... so they add all the marks and then for example, two people are on the top for

Appendix 5  
Ethics Approval

**Appendix 6**  
**Letters to Parents**

# THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Parent,

You are invited to school to be part of a group of parents talking to a researcher from UBC. We will be talking about programs offered by the school that help you support your child's literacy development. This meeting is important because it gives you an opportunity to tell us your point of view. Your comments will be audio taped and the results will help us find out more about how children learn. A translator will be present to help you with the discussion.

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

TIME \_\_\_\_\_

PLACE \_\_\_\_\_

Please return the bottom part of this letter so that we know how many parents will be coming.

Thank you for your help.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Classroom teacher \_\_\_\_\_ Researcher

-----  
Parent Meeting on \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ I will be coming to the meeting.

\_\_\_ I will not be coming to the meeting

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

# THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



Faculty of Education  
2125 Main Mall  
Vancouver, B.C.  
Canada V6T 1Z4

Dear families,

You are invited to take part in a research project that is looking at how families help children learn and how the school and families can work together. This research is part of a national research project at UBC. The researcher, who used to teach at Dickens school, would like to meet you and talk about issues you might have in helping your child. These meetings will be held at the school between 9 and 10 a.m. Meetings will be held for Chinese, Vietnamese, Spanish and English speaking parents. There will be an interpreter at each meeting.

During the meetings you will be asked to sign a consent form to allow the meeting to be recorded and your comments to be used in the research. Your name will not be used in the final report.

If you are willing to help in the research by attending a meeting please sign the form below and your child's teacher will let you know the dates meetings will be held.

Thank you for your cooperation and help in this important research.

If you have any concerns about this please call the researcher, Patricia Porter or the project supervisor Dr M. Early at UBC

☒ I would like to be invited to a meeting.

☐ I do not want to be invited to a meeting.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

# THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



Faculty of Education  
2125 Main Mall  
Vancouver, B.C.  
Canada V6T 1Z4

Quý vị phụ huynh thân mến!

Xin trân trọng kính mời quý vị tham gia vào đề tài nghiên cứu để tìm hiểu về việc gia đình giúp con em trong học tập như thế nào và làm thế nào để trường học và gia đình có thể hợp tác với nhau. Phần nghiên cứu này là một bộ phận của công trình nghiên cứu mang tính quốc gia của Đại học UBC.

Chuyên gia nghiên cứu là giáo viên trước đây tại Trường Tiểu học Dickens, muốn gặp gỡ quý vị để nói chuyện về vấn đề mà quý vị gặp phải trong việc giúp con em mình học tập. Những buổi họp này sẽ được tổ chức tại trường trong thời gian từ 9:00 tới 10:00 giờ sáng. Các buổi họp sẽ được tổ chức cho các sắc dân khác nhau và sẽ có người thông dịch.

Trong buổi họp quý vị sẽ được đề nghị ký tên vào bản chấp thuận việc thu băng buổi họp và những ý kiến đóng góp của quý vị để sử dụng vào việc nghiên cứu. Tên của quý vị sẽ không có trong bản báo cáo tổng kết.

Nếu quý vị đồng ý tham gia vào công trình nghiên cứu bằng việc tham dự buổi họp, xin hãy ký tên vào dưới đây và giáo viên của các cháu sẽ cho quý vị biết ngày giờ cụ thể của buổi họp.

Xin chân thành cảm ơn sự hợp tác và giúp đỡ của quý vị vào công trình nghiên cứu quan trọng này.

\_\_\_\_\_ Tôi muốn tham gia buổi họp

\_\_\_\_\_ Tôi không muốn tham gia buổi họp



# THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



Faculty of Education  
2125 Main Mall  
Vancouver, B.C.  
Canada V6T 1Z4



各位家长：

谨此诚意邀请您参与一项研究工作，这项研究旨在探讨家人如何协助孩子学习，以及学校怎样与家长共同合作。这是卑诗大学在全国进行研究工作的一环。

我们的研究员曾在 Dickens school 任教，她希望与您们举行会议，讨论有关协助您孩子学习的事情，时间是上午 9 时至 10 时，地点是在学校，并且分别为操不同语言的家长举行会议，包括中文、越南文、西班牙语和英语，每次会议均会提供传译服务。

在会议上，您须签署一份同意书，表示同意把会议内容录音，并且把您的意见用于这项研究。不过，在发表报告时，将不会公开您的姓名。

如果您愿意协助这项研究工作，请在以下表格上签署，届时您孩子的老师会告知您有关会议的时间。

得蒙协助这项重要的研究工作，谨此致谢！

若有任何问题，请致电研究员 Patricia Porter 女士(604 733 9449) 或卑诗大学负责督导这项计划的 Dr M. Early (604 822 5231)。

\_\_\_\_\_ 本人愿意应邀出席会议。

\_\_\_\_\_ 本人不愿意接受邀请。

姓名 \_\_\_\_\_



Appendix 7  
Consent Forms

## **CONSENT FORM – Parents/Guardians**

### **From Literacy to Multiliteracies**

Principal investigators: Drs. Margaret Early and John Willinsky  
Department of Language and literacy Education, UBC

Co-investigators: Charles Naylor, Diane Potts, Patricia Porter, Vetta Vratulis,  
Graduate Students, Department of Language and Literacy  
Education, UBC

#### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to explore the classroom activities which support students' development of both traditional reading and writing skills and new literacies. Text, audio and visual information are being combined in new ways at home, at work and in our daily lives. We want to obtain a better understanding of best practices in the classroom by investigating multiple forms of literacy that students perform in and out of school.

#### **PROCEDURES:**

If you agree to allow your child to participate in the research, he/she will be observed while the teacher delivers regular lessons. Observations will be conducted during two or three units of study. The lessons that will be observed are a regular part of your child's education. Your child's classroom activities and discussions will be videotaped and/or recorded only with your permission. Your child's participation or lack of participation will not affect how the classes are taught. We will make every effort not to disrupt the class' routine because we want to understand what the teachers and students usually do.

Students will also be interviewed about his/her use of language in her/his personal and academic lives. Interviews with students will be audiotaped. Interviews may be conducted individually or in groups depending on the participants' preferences. Your child will only be interviewed with your permission. You can review the videotapes and audio recordings at any time.

Students' classwork will also be collected. This may include creative and/or academic writing, artwork or models, or materials that your child creates using a computer. We will also be asking teachers to talk about his/her ideas about reading and writing, and what happens in the classroom.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Your child's identity will be kept strictly confidential. Your child and your child's school will not be named in any reports of the completed study.

Sometimes a student may be very proud of her/his work and want to have his/her name included. For example, perhaps your child writes a poem or creates a webpage that is very special to her/him. If your child wants her/his name to be included with his/her work, we will send another note to you. We will not include your child's name without first getting your permission.

#### DURATION:

Classroom observations will take place throughout two or three units of study. The researcher will not observe the class for an entire day. They will observe the class only while specific subjects and units are being taught. Researchers will interview your child for about thirty (30) minutes and only at a time that doesn't interfere with her/his studies. The class will be videotaped twice during each unit. Each videotaping will last about 50 minutes. The camera will be arranged so that it doesn't interfere with the lesson.

#### REFUSALS:

You have the right to refuse to allow your child to participate at any time; it is not a problem if you do not wish your child to be interviewed, observed, or recorded (videotaped or audio recorded).

#### DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) have funded this study. SSHRC is a national government agency. We will share what we learn at national and international conferences and publish results in professional and research journals. Reports based on these presentations and articles will be available to all participants.

#### INQUIRIES:

We will be happy to answer any questions about the research at any time. Please do not hesitate to contact us either in person, by e-mail, or by telephone.

#### CONCERNS

If you have any concerns about your rights or treatment as a research subject, you may contact the UBC Office of Research Services and Administration, at

If you have any questions about the study, contact the investigators, Dr.

Margaret Early at  
Willinsky at

or :

and Dr. John

## CONSENT

*Please complete the following and return it to your child's teacher.*

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above. You understand that your child's participation in this research is voluntary, and that you have freely and willingly consented to allow your child to participate in this research project. Your signature also indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. You may withdraw your consent at any time without any consequences to your child.

Please check the appropriate box for each line:

You agree that your child:

☐ Can participate in this study.

☐ Can be audio recorded for this study.

☐ Can be videotaped for this study

☐ I do not give consent for my child to participate in this study

Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**CONSENT FORM – Teachers**  
**From Literacy to Multiliteracies**

Principal investigators: Drs. Margaret Early and John Willinsky  
Department of Language and Literacy Education, UBC

Co- investigators: Charles Naylor, Diane Potts, Patricia Porter, Vetta Vratulis,  
Graduate Students, Department of Literacy Education, UBC

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to conduct an investigation into the expanded range of literacy practices required in today's technologically evolving, globalized society in order to identify pedagogical options particularly appropriate for teaching and assessing diverse forms of literacy (e.g. information and communication, media and cultural) necessary to be successful in the New Economy. We hope to identify practices that capitalize on the literacies that students bring with them into the classroom, and that expand students' ability to create and achieve the social futures they envision for themselves and their communities. This study draws on previous studies (New London Group, 1996) of the multiple forms of literacy required to function in the economic and social fabric of the twenty-first century and aims to understand the implications for literacy education of changing, economic, technological and sociocultural conditions. We aim to develop a pedagogical framework for multiple-literacy theory and practices, both instruction and assessment; and to address what systemic conditions need to be in place, in schools, school districts and in the broader educational community, to facilitate implementation of multiliteracy practices and school improvement.

**PROCEDURES**

You will be involved in designing a structure for data collection that focuses on 2-3 units or activities during the school term that promise to provide some insight into the multiple uses of literacy in the classroom during various parts of the school program. These activities (ranging in time from a few days to a week or two) will be the principal periods of data gathering for this project.

You will work together with a member of the project team to identify current or proposed units of study that you think will help us understand how literacies are developed and practiced in your classroom. You will be involved in deciding how and when data will be collected. The total length of time involved in data collection will vary depending on the units of study selected; however, in most cases data collection will take place over several days and in all cases data collection will be completed in no more than two weeks for every unit. Every effort will be made to avoid disrupting the regular routine of the class.

We will take field notes during class observations of these units or activities, and will audio and/or videotape classroom observations only with your permission. As part of the research, you will be interviewed regarding your ideas pertaining to literacy, literacy practices and the observed units of study. We will seek your permission to record these interviews to ensure that your understandings are accurately represented. We will also seek permission from your students and their parents to interview students about their literacy practices and their own understandings about the role of literacies in their lives.

You have a range of options as to how actively you participate in the research project. We can discuss how you might participate in data gathering and analysis including analysis of students' textual, visual or digital works and/or keeping a literacy log of your personal reflections during and after the unit(s) of study.

#### DURATION

We will observe classrooms only while the mutually agreed upon units are being taught. If you agree, classroom activities will be videotaped twice for about 50 minutes during each unit of study. Interviews with you and with students will last approximately 30 minutes each. The interviews will be conducted by one of the researchers at a time convenient to you and your student.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

The identity of you, your students and your school will be kept strictly confidential. Subjects will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. Data will only be made available to the co-investigators or investigators.

Sometimes a student may be very proud of her/his work and want to have his/her name included. For example, perhaps a student writes a poem or creates a webpage that is very special to her/him. Separate written consent from both the student and the parent will be obtained before attribution will be made.

#### DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada have funded this study under their program for "Initiatives for the New Economy." Findings will be presented at national and international conferences and published in

professional and research journals. Reports based on these presentations and articles will be available to participants.

#### REFUSAL

Participation in this project is optional. You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw your consent to participate at any time.

#### INQUIRIES

We will be happy to answer your questions about the research. Please do not hesitate to contact us either in person, by e-mail, or by telephone.

#### CONCERNS

If you have any concerns about your rights or treatment as a research subject, you may contact the UBC Office of Research Services and Administration, at (604) 822-8598. If you have any questions about the study, contact the investigators, Dr. Margaret Early at \_\_\_\_\_ or at \_\_\_\_\_; and/or Dr. John Willinsky at \_\_\_\_\_ or at \_\_\_\_\_.

#### CONSENT

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information above, understand that your participation in this research is voluntary, and that you have freely and willingly consented to participate in this research project. Your signature also indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. You may withdraw your consent at any time without any consequences to your employment or professional standing.

#### SIGNATURE

Please check one box:

- ☐ I consent to participate in this study.  
☐ I consent to be video taped in this study

Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_