

Family literacy

in the francophone community

by **Jacqueline Chartier**

In the late 1990s, Margo Fauchon was the provincial coordinator for francophone literacy programs in Alberta. She faced many of the same issues and challenges as those practising in English-language literacy programs, but knew about the uniqueness of the francophone situation in Alberta and throughout western Canada. Of Alberta's 2.9 million inhabitants, approximately 560,000 have a mother tongue other than English. Francophones make up slightly over 2 per cent of the population (58,645 according to the 2001 census).



Fauchon strove to raise awareness of the history, demographics and geography of the francophone population in Alberta, and the impact that such factors have on planning and implementing French literacy services. "My work to sensitize the general public and lobby key individuals within the education department helped to make people more open to francophones communicating and learning in their mother tongue," she said.

During this period, Fauchon became intrigued by an innovative family literacy program that had originally been developed in English. While attending

a conference, she met Lauren MacKenzie and Elaine Cairns, the Calgary-based creators of Literacy and Parenting Skills (LAPS). Fauchon saw a strong need for a family literacy program in French and sensed that the LAPS curriculum could be successfully translated and adapted.

The original LAPS manual, published in the fall of 1996, outlines twelve sessions based on the needs and concerns relevant to parents, such as building children's self-esteem, positive discipline and anger management. By 1999, the LAPS program was well established throughout English Canada. The

LAPS team had developed an English as a second language (ESL) version and an Aboriginal version. These adaptations reflected cross-cultural approaches and cultural sensitivity appropriate to the participants.

Most significantly, two new sessions had been added to deal with concerns specific to ESL and Aboriginal participants: *Passing on Our Values* and *Dealing with the School*. Fauchon was impressed.

Meanwhile, Lauren MacKenzie and Elaine Cairns had been approached by some

French-speaking parents who wanted LAPS materials redesigned for the francophone population. In response, the pair consulted informally with francophone literacy practitioners from various regions of Canada. The results were exciting, and validated the fact that there is a widespread demand for family literacy services. In addition to their more conventional clients, practitioners frequently mentioned dealing with clients who were educated but whose French skills were poor. They also noted that in the past decade a greater number of parents have been enrolling their children in French first language and French immersion schools.

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Consequently, there was an increasing need for parents to improve their own reading and writing skills in French so that they could be directly involved in their children's education and better support their children's learning.

About two years after Fauchon first met MacKenzie and Cairns, a formal partnership was launched.

Funding from the National Literacy Secretariat supported a nationwide French version of LAPS to be called *Grandir avec mon enfant*—LAPS. The partners in the project were the Further Education Society of Alberta, Bow Valley College, the *Centre éducatif communautaire de l'Alberta* and *Eduk*, another provincial francophone organization.

Louise Joly of Saint Paul, Alberta, working in close association with the original authors, adapted the content to address francophone needs. She also developed a manual that embraced the philosophy and integrity of the original program. Like Fauchon, she was delighted with the overall content of the English LAPS program and was anxious to see how it would be received in various francophone communities. "It's a strength-based program," Joly explained. "It builds on the strengths parents have already instead of focusing on their shortcomings."

At this stage, the *Grandir* team interviewed practitioners in a cross-section of community settings across Canada. They received valuable input about the target audience. The adapted version therefore addresses the needs of francophone and francophile parents in all regions of Canada who are interested in improving their parenting and literacy skills. This group has many common elements as parents and francophones. They also have different socio-economic, geographic and cultural needs. Certain people are isolated and feel the need to meet with other francophones to share and discuss their parental role. Others face numerous challenges in maintaining their language and culture, while others want to improve their literacy skills.

The next phase was to select sites in which to pilot the fledgling program. In 2001, *Grandir* was piloted in francophone communities in four provinces: two sites in New Brunswick, and one each in Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta.

The *Grandir* team hired an outside evaluator to solicit feedback and document participants' responses. The outside evaluators found that participants were very satisfied with their progress on a personal level. They felt more confident in their roles as readers and writers. For example, one participant stated that after having completed the program his vocabulary had improved. Another stated that because of her participation in the program, she felt more motivated to improve her

Innovative Early Literacy Resources for Parents of Deaf Children

by **Joanne Cripps**
and **Anita Small**

The Ontario Cultural Society of the Deaf (OCSd) has developed a resource for parents of Deaf and hearing newborns and toddlers who would like to interact with their children in American Sign Language (ASL). The *ASL Parent Child Mother Goose Program: American Sign Language Rhymes, Rhythms and Stories for Parents and their Children* is available on videotape or DVD. It encourages positive early ASL interaction and provides examples of ASL rhythms and rhymes parents can share with infants or toddlers. The OCSd has also published *A Parent Guidebook: ASL and Early Literacy*. This illustrated book includes resources, activities and milestones. It highlights how parents can encourage language and literacy in the early years, developing close bonds through playful language and literacy interactions.

The OCSd developed these materials because most Deaf children have not had the language and literacy they need before they begin preschool. Development of the resources was funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care for the Infant Hearing Program (IHP), the Ontario Early Years Challenge Fund and the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

These materials cost \$15 each, or \$25 for the guidebook plus either the video or DVD. To order, contact the Ontario Cultural Society of the Deaf at ocsd@deafliteracy.ca

For more information, go to www.ccsdeaf.com/ocsd/main.html



Researching Family Literacy

Learning Together: Read and Write with Your Child is a six-year longitudinal study of the effectiveness of family literacy programs. It started in 2000 and aims to discover whether participating in a program benefits (1) children's literacy development, (2) parents' literacy development, and (3) parents' ability to assist in the development of their children's literacy. This is the only experimental longitudinal study of adult and family literacy in the world. The goal of The Learning Together way is to demonstrate that appropriate interventions can make a positive difference, particularly for children who have limited language and literacy experiences. Results from the study will be released in 2006.

Learning Together is an outreach program offered by Alberta's Centre for Family Literacy. It's offered in Edmonton and two outlying communities, Millet and Wetaskiwin. The program targets children who are three to five years old and their lower-income parents with less than a grade twelve education.

The research about Learning Together is led by Linda Phillips and Ruth Hayden at the Centre for Research on Literacy at the University of Alberta. Sponsored by Alberta Learning, The Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network, and the National Literacy Secretariat, the research is now into its fifth year. Approximately half of the preschool children and their parents have engaged in the Learning Together program for three half days each week over twelve weeks. The remaining 112 children and their parents make

Parents are interviewed and assessed each year on their attitudes toward literacy and the kinds of activities they participate in with their children.

up the control group and do not participate in the program. Rather, they get on with what they normally do each day.

Three doctoral students and eight research assistants assessed the literacy skills of children and their parents before taking the *Learning Together* program. After completing the program, parents are interviewed and assessed each year on their attitudes toward literacy and the kinds of activities they participate in with their children. The same interviews and assessments are conducted each year with parents in the control group. The research team is also assessing whether the program has had a positive impact on the children, most of whom are now in kindergarten and grade one.

The data from the standardized tests administered to the children and adults will be used to measure the effects of the intervention. The regular interviews and observational data will be used to complement the quantitative data to offer a more complete and robust picture of the Learning Together program and the lives of the families. To date, we have learned from the qualitative data that it is critical to (1) understand that many of these families live difficult and complex lives, (2) listen to what the families have to say about their wishes, hopes and dreams for their children, and (3) rethink the importance of home/school collaboration for sustained literacy development.

For more information about the research, contact the Centre for Research on Literacy at the University of Alberta (www.nald.ca/crl.htm).

reading and writing skills in French. The participants also felt more confident in their roles as parents.

With demand for the new *Grandir* program high, more qualified facilitators are needed. While Margo Fauchon has moved on to other projects, Louise Joly is recruiting and training individuals to facilitate the program. The partnership between the Further

Education Society of Alberta and *Centre éducatif communautaire de l'Alberta* no longer exists but has evolved into a new partnership. Today the Further Education Society of Alberta is collaborating with *Eduk* with support from the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS). *Partenariat interministeriel avec les communautés de langue officielle* (PICLO) has joined

Francophone and francophile parents in all regions of Canada have common elements, as well as different socioeconomic, geographic and cultural needs.

NLS in supporting this latest *Grandir* project. Louise Joly intends to have thirty or forty trained facilitators throughout Canada by the end of 2004.

Today, members of the *Grandir* team look back on the creation of *Grandir avec mon enfant-LAPS* with pride and look forward to its future. There is a sense of accomplishment and a tremendous degree of enthusiasm for what they have produced. Perhaps a statement from their final report summarizes it best:

To our knowledge, there exists no other program in French that offers parents the possibility of improving reading, writing and parenting skills in one comprehensive program. ■