

Literacy Workers and Health Practitioners Talk

by **Sheila Stewart**

In early 2004, the Festival of Literacies brought together a group to explore the relationships between wellness, literacy and learning. An interest in wellness and literacy had been raised at various times, with a different emphasis by practitioners/researchers from the Aboriginal and Anglophone streams who attended the first OISE/UT (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto) Adult Literacy Research Circle in 2002. The new wellness group, coordinated by Joy Lehmann, met over five months to discuss and share our ideas and those of our literacy students and colleagues. Our goal was to explore the concepts of wellness and learning and how they connect. We also wanted to develop a funding proposal so that we could take this work further into a research-in-practice project.

Joy and I sought out health practitioners and administrators, particularly those from community health centres, who were interested in culturally diverse approaches to wellness and health. As literacy workers who reject a deficit model of literacy, we wanted to connect with like-minded health practitioners who use holistic practices. We felt that practices that look at the whole person with their various strengths were comparable to our approach to literacy work. It was exciting to go beyond literacy in our effort to become more articulate about the work we do, to feel that other practices and other discourses could help us in how we conceive of our work.

Our group of nine literacy and health practitioners engaged in probing the connection between adult learning and wellness. Fundamental to our discussions were the questions: What do we mean by wellness and by literacy? What does wellness mean in the context of people living in poverty? What does wellness mean to literacy learners?

In our discussions we often used the word learning rather than literacy. We were trying to talk about other ways of understanding learning and to identify the abilities and conditions people bring to learning. Beneath these concerns seem to be questions about how learning happens for people with low literacy skills. How do self-esteem, confidence and social participation relate to learning

and a sense of well-being?

Politically there is an urgency to better articulate what we mean by learning and literacy, as funding bodies become more interested in measuring learning. If we can more clearly talk about what we mean by learning in the context of adult literacy programs, we will be in a better position to affect the future policy frameworks that will shape our work. Likewise, we feel literacy practitioners have much to offer the broad discussion of determinants of health; certainly even a narrow definition of literacy can be aptly called a determinant of health, but there is much more to say about the complex ways wellness and learning are entwined and interdependent.

During the five months we met, we discussed wellness and literacy and explored a range of possible funding sources. The latter necessarily shaped the former in certain ways, but we tried not to let our short-term goal of submitting a funding proposal stifle our need to explore fundamental questions. We gave ourselves time to think about the ideas and explore what felt like the most intriguing and pressing avenues of research enquiry, as well as focusing on the requirements of the available funders. Increasingly, we see this as a key part of a good research process.

Our discussions were enriched by the fact that several of the participants went back to their programs and discussed wellness with their students. The responses were of great interest to our group. They helped us root our discussions in the experience of people attending literacy programs. This kind of exploratory, small-scale pilot research can be seen as an interesting example of research in practice. The practitioners wrote up what students said and reported back to the group what had happened in their programs. What was the role of our group in prompting and being a sounding board for discussions of what had happened in these literacy groups? Part of the dynamism of this process was that we didn't wait to get funding to have these discussions with students. Perhaps these discussions weren't as systematically recorded as we might expect of more formal research, however they generated engagement both in the learning groups and in our research group. They were rare instances of literacy practitioners trying out

something in a group and having somewhere specific to go to reflect aloud on what happened. The discussions with students were open-ended explorations of wellness; they weren't tightly focused yet on the relationship between wellness and learning, though they opened some new doors to this kind of discussion. The facilitators reflected on how they had prompted the discussions and on the different ways that the discussions could have been led. These explorations with students grounded our reflections

on literacy and wellness and shaped the funding proposal we were writing, as we realized that we would like students' own articulations about wellness to be at the core of this project.

Even though we are still searching for funding, practitioners from three programs continue to talk with their learners and are planning to bring these groups together for further discussions. In the meantime, we'd like to share working notes from one member who did this work in her program. ■

Learners at Literacy for East Toronto Talk about Wellness

by Susan Lefebvre

This group of nine learners has been meeting twice a week and are very comfortable discussing their life experiences and expressing opinions. We

have been focusing on the writing process:

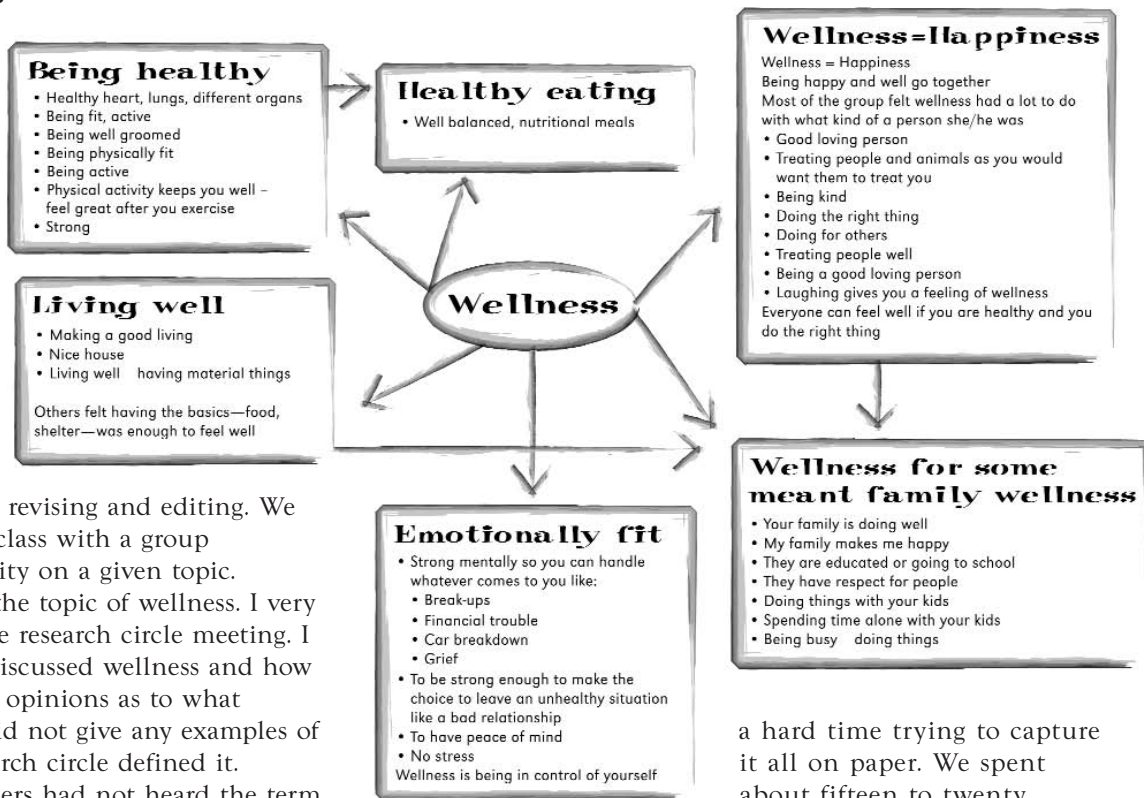
brainstorming/free

writing, composing, revising and editing. We usually begin each class with a group brainstorming activity on a given topic.

So I introduced the topic of wellness. I very briefly described the research circle meeting. I explained we had discussed wellness and how there were different opinions as to what wellness meant. I did not give any examples of how we at the research circle defined it.

Most of the learners had not heard the term wellness and were initially confused by it. Two immediately went to the dictionary and found no entry for the word. I posed the question: "What makes you feel well?"

I used a webbing technique on flip chart paper to record and organize their thoughts. Wow! Once they got going, the ideas flowed so quickly we had



a hard time trying to capture it all on paper. We spent about fifteen to twenty minutes on this activity. I

did not give them any other prompts.

The comments that neither the volunteer taking notes nor myself expected were the ones that made the connection between wellness and being a kind, loving, respectful person. I was expecting more comments around income. ■

Sheila Stewart is the Coordinator of the Festival of Literacies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. The participants in the Wellness Group were: Sherri Anderson, Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse; May Hughes, Family Health and Healthy Living Intake, Toronto Public Health; Susan Lefebvre, Literacy for East Toronto; Joy Lehmann, Festival of Literacies; Johanna Pax-Milic, LAMP, Lakeshore Area Community Health Agency; Cheryl Reid, Regent Park Learning Centre, Dixon Hall; Esther Nordin Skoggard, ALFA Literacy Services, Davenport-Perth Neighbourhood Centre and Tracy Westell, Parkdale Project Read.