

Gender, Culture and 'Organized Chaos'

What the Weaving Literacy project learned about integrating literacy

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Between May and September of 2004, the Weaving Literacy project brought together literacy organizations and family resource groups from 22 communities in Canada to promote collaborative and integrated approaches to literacy in their communities. Each team included a member of a literacy organization and someone from a family resource group. The teams developed a one-year literacy plan for their community, and each team was given \$3,000 to implement their plan. At the end of the year, the teams met again to share their experiences.

The Weaving Literacy project was inspired by the work of literacy groups such as the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut literacy councils, Parenting for a Literate Community, and many other groups who adopt a collaborative, community-building approach to literacy. The primary goal of the Weaving Literacy project was to build on these collaborative practices, extend them to new communities, and develop resources and an infrastructure to train, support and sustain integrated, community-building approaches to literacy across Canada.

What is an integrated approach?

Adopting an asset-based approach to community planning for literacy means adopting definitions of literacy that build on people's knowledge, interests and social context for learning, rather than on the 'skills' they are 'lacking.' A social practice view of literacy sees literacy as embedded in meaningful social contexts for learning. In her research into the experiences of literacy and language collaborations around the world, Elsa Auerbach found that,

Case studies of literacy collaborations suggest that the way to promote language/literacy goals may be not by focusing directly on language and literacy, but rather by focusing on community-based activities identified by participants. [R]igid adherence to predetermined goals may actually undermine the efficacy of a partnership (Auerbach p. 4).

Weaving Literacy action plans

Each of the 22 action plans responded to the unique context shaping literacy and learning in each community, but all shared common aims to embed literacy into existing learning opportunities, and to work closely with other community agencies to address literacy and learning needs in the community in a holistic and proactive way. Following an asset-based philosophy, the Weaving Literacy coordinating team did not stipulate, beyond the original literacy-family resource collaboration, which additional organizations or sectors the Weaving Literacy teams should partner with. Nor did we place strict time frames on when each team needed to carry out the steps of their plan, or how they should spend their \$3,000. This made it possible for teams to look for opportunities to integrate literacy work into existing activities, and build relationships with people and organizations, when the timing was right. The plans resulted in a number of new resources, projects and ongoing initiatives that are detailed in the project's final report. To summarize, the focus on local contexts meant that what 'counted' as family literacy issues addressed in the literacy action plans varied widely from community to community. It included drug use and diabetes, school drop-out rates, the need for better inter-agency co-operation, parent and community involvement in schools, maintaining language and culture, poverty, hunger and the need for quality after-school care and out-migration in resource-based communities

In May 2005 the teams came together to share their experiences. They identified a number of common issues that shape the possibilities and constraints for asset-based approaches to community literacy in Canada.

Gender and working conditions

Participants in the Weaving Literacy project frequently mentioned lack of time as a significant challenge in implementing their action plan. Here are a few comments:

"Our workshops took place in the evening and if it took me away from my workplace I took a vacation day without pay."

"I have a seven year old child and the travel can be upsetting, along with my work schedule, which is a bit rushed at times."

Time and money constraints are so common to community work that it almost seems cliché to list these as significant challenges to building sustainable integrated literacy initiatives. But in considering the issue closely, Weaving Literacy participants pointed out that the issue of 'lack of time and insufficient funds' isn't just about the need to find yet more ways to do more with less. It is really about the working conditions for people who do community-based education and family support work: work that is carried out almost entirely by women. Society's attitude is that community-building, such as creating and maintaining relationships, planning, and organizing is part of what women do 'naturally' so it is often not considered 'real work.' Yet if the fruits of community-building work are considered worthwhile, the work of planning and collaboration that produces these all-important 'deliverables' needs to be recognized and supported by salaries that pay a 'living wage,' and builds collaborative work into job descriptions. The \$3,000 provided to each team by the Weaving Literacy project was designed to recognize this real work, and team members said that they would not have had the time or resources to carry out the planning and implementation work in this project if the money and support had not been available.

Funding constraints

Another issue that arose was the contradiction between funding priorities and local realities. Many family support groups receive money that can only be spent to support the development of children from birth to age six. Literacy groups are funded to do family literacy or adult literacy programming. But what about the social and literacy needs of school-aged children, youth, and adults without children? One Weaving Literacy project had funding to provide

childcare and literacy activities for children up to age six while their parents attended an evening literacy workshop, but they did not have the mandate or capacity to include siblings who were over six years old. Families have children of many ages—must these children stand in the hall while their parents and younger siblings engage in family literacy activities?

Literacy groups who participated in the Weaving Literacy project were very happy to reach out to new families with young children. However, in some cases they were concerned lest the literacy needs of others be forgotten: adults who are not parents (or don't attend education programs as parents), school-age children, youth and seniors. Fortunately, many of the Weaving Literacy teams have plans to build on their initial work together and continue to expand their literacy initiatives with other community groups.

The work of literacy organizations

In approaching literacy as something that connects to the work of all community groups, it is easy to slide

into a view that if literacy is 'everywhere,' then any group can 'do' literacy. But in the Weaving Literacy project we learned that literacy organizations have a key role to play. This is because literacy is linked to so many aspects of life, but also because literacy organizations have, for many years, been largely focused on facilitating the diverse literacy and learning needs of adults outside of school settings. They have invaluable expertise in embedding

literacy instruction and learning principles into community-based programming.

Cultural and linguistic identity

Broad concepts of literacy rooted in indigenous knowledge formed a key theme in the work of Weaving Literacy teams supporting First Nations and Inuit literacy in their communities. Rather than seeing western literacy as the norm, First Nations and Inuit Weaving Literacy teams asked what aspects of western literacy were useful and important to their communities, and which aspects of indigenous literacy needed to be strengthened and valued, not only by First Nations groups themselves, but by the



Gwen Villebrun and Michelle Hanson-Cunningham take information about literacy and community services for families on the road in High Prairie, Alberta

mainstream culture as well. In this way, oral traditions, ways of living on the land, parenting styles and approaches to healing could be seen not as a barrier to literacy or school success, but rather as integral aspects of what it means to be literate in a given community.

The indigenous perspective on literacy made an important contribution to the Weaving Literacy project: it highlighted the importance of culture as a context for learning, rather than as an 'add-on' activity. Mike Bell, an educator in Nunavut, captures this finding:

"It is not enough to simply try to teach the ability to read and write. All learning occurs within a 'learning context,' a framework within which reading and writing has meaning."

Maintaining their culture and language was also a worry for Weaving Literacy participants from minority Francophone and new immigrant communities. Teams in these communities developed plans to create a dialogue among community leaders about how to bridge the needs for English and for school literacy with the need to maintain and value the languages and cultural values of their communities. The similarities and differences between the contexts for literacy learning in Francophone minority and Francophone majority communities enriched the project. The politics of 'scarcity' with regard to funding for Francophone literacy in minority communities, as well as the place of the French language in North America, formed the basis for local planning practices and discussions that have only just begun.

Moving from specialization to inter-disciplinary work

"The most successful part of our plan was to hook into what was already going on in the community. We are not rock stars, we don't need a stand-alone gig."

-Prema Ladhumanopaskeran and Beth Mulloy, Whitehorse Weaving Literacy team

The project model evolved into what we called 'organized chaos,' in which we balanced a 'context-driven' approach to supporting 22 diverse plans with a national structure that ensured the project could be completed and documented within the two-year period. This approach, which aims to respect the diversity of community planning processes, required that we move away from separating specialized disciplines, towards interdisciplinary, collaborative approaches to building and sharing knowledge, and working in communities. Indeed, this vision of knowledge and learning is articulated in disciplines outside of what may be traditionally thought of as 'literacy' or 'education.' For

example, the Canadian Federal Government's *Framework of Environmental Learning and Sustainability in Canada* recognizes that, "All members of society should be engaged in learning, in ways that are participatory and transformative." It calls for approaches to learning in Canada that intersect with the philosophy and approach to learning that underpinned the Weaving Literacy project. These include,

- Recovering, restoring, honouring and using the traditional knowledge and wisdom of Aboriginal people;
 - Learning from those who value local knowledge as well as the knowledge and wisdom acquired by a people living in a region for a long time;
 - Using intergenerational approaches, so learners and educators can learn from one another with mutual respect.
- (Environment Canada)

As diverse community agencies, social movements and various levels of government inside and outside of Canada incorporate interdisciplinary, co-operative and integrated approaches to knowledge creation and sustainability into their work, these values and practices should be a key feature of a Canadian literacy strategy as well. ■

The Weaving Literacy project was a collaboration between the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada) and the Movement for Canadian Literacy. It was funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. A full report of the project is available from the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs at www.frp.ca.

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