

# **PUBLISH IT! CHILDREN AND PARENTS – PARTNERS IN LEARNING**

## **Program History and Overview**

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November, 2009

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## **Introduction**

Literacy is a key foundation to the economic, social, cultural and civic development of a community. Because the family is a community's smallest school, it is in the interest of all to take steps to assure that the homes of all children are able to provide the critical support for children's literacy learning, as well as form partnerships with schools and literacy educators.

Family literacy is an innovative and successful way of developing literacy skills of adults and children, of building stronger relationships between parents/guardians and children, of getting parents involved in their children's education, and of building stronger and healthier schools and communities. The family is a rich context for literacy development and "parents are their children's first and most important teachers" (Morrow, 1995).

Involving families in the writing and publication of non-fiction picture books is a unique way to deliver family and adult literacy programming.

## **Family Literacy and Literacy**

Family Literacy as a community initiative requires all family and community stakeholders to be involved. Literacy development cannot take place in isolation. It must be a part of an integrated and collaborative effort of schools, community-based organisations, churches, adults, youth and children working together in developing and implementing comprehensive initiatives. Family literacy builds on existing community resources and strengths and fosters a home environment that is conducive to learning. Learning to read is the most important academic task in the young child's life and is critical to their ability to succeed in school.

Many adults who are illiterate perceive this to be a stigma and do not wish to be identified by others as illiterate. This fear can keep adults from going to literacy classes, where they could receive the support they need to learn to read and write. They may also hesitate or avoid going to their children's schools or participating in school and community meetings and events. Often parents who are illiterate or function at a low literacy level are self-conscious of their ability and therefore have low confidence.

Experience has shown that parents who struggle with literacy may have had negative reading and learning experiences in their own school years and feel self-conscious of their lack of literacy skills. These negative experiences can result in parents or guardians withdrawing from supporting their own children's education. Often, parents are not aware of the powerful influence they have on their children's attitude toward literacy and learning, or are not aware of how they can help their children to do better in school, regardless of their own education level. Parents' educational level, particularly mothers', is strongly linked to children's health, school readiness and school achievement (Fosseen & Sticht, 1991).

Being able to help their children or grandchildren in school is often an incentive for parents and caregivers to pursue literacy classes. As well, parents and caregivers who have increased their literacy levels begin to take an interest in their children's education, assist children with homework, attend Parent Teacher Association Meetings, become more involved in the community and more productive in the workplace.

Focusing a literacy program around the family, can create a safe learning environment for parents/guardians to enter without the fear of being stigmatized for their low literacy abilities. Parents/caregivers want to support their child's learning and this approach also supports their learning, in a subtle manner, as they learn strategies to help their child learn to read fluently. Research indicates that effective intervention and prevention efforts must work with the family as a unit. There is agreement among educators that the practice of family literacy must focus on the needs, interests, and literacy routines of all family members, regardless of their ages (Cairney, 1995; Epstein, 2001) and that expanding on families' shared experiences provides another entry into supporting literacy among all family members (Richardson & Sacks, 2003). As well, parents are more likely to complete a program in family literacy than in other types of adult literacy programs (Tracey, 1995). An intergenerational cooperative effort promotes the family as a learning unit where everyone is a learner who brings their own abilities and challenges to the place of learning. Furthermore reading and learning are experienced as a valuable family activity, and this can become an incentive for lifelong learning. Parents/caregivers experience success along with their child.

## **THE PUBLISH IT! MODEL**

***Publish It! Children and Parents – Partners in Learning*** is a family literacy program concept aimed at improving students' motivation to read and write by increasing parent participation in children's literacy learning. The project design involves families in the writing, self-publishing and home and school use of high-interest, locally produced non-fiction books. Parents and children collaborate on the writing and also learn how to illustrate and publish their book, using digital photography to illustrate them. A web-site describes the project. Selected books are available on the website, in Flip Book format, for classroom and home use, along with links to other information for parents on related topics.

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF THE INITIATIVE**

These principles act as pillars and guideposts for family literacy partnerships and are the foundation that frames the Publish It! initiative.

### *Culturally Appropriate*

It is essential that family literacy initiative be culturally appropriate and relevant. This includes holistic approaches to learning and teaching, materials that support and honour cultural learning, and the involvement of the local community.

### *Family Centred*

The pillar is the family. The family concept is a principle that is inclusive, holistic, flexible, and collective. It is a concept that includes past, present and future family members. A literacy plan with a family focus is aimed at the whole family and fosters relationship-building and collaboration.

#### *Capacity building and Sustainability*

Capacity building means increasing the personal and collective knowledge, skill and ability of participants to plan, develop, implement, carry out, manage and evaluate family literacy programs. This principle promotes and sustains lifelong learning for all participants and focuses on improving the life phases of children and adults. This principle reminds us that there is a need to secure adequate long-term funding in order to develop capacity and ensure success.

#### *Accessibility*

All community members should have the opportunity to be part of the program. Every attempt should be made to reduce barriers to participation.

## **PROGRAM PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

The program was developed by Dr. Jane Baskwill, Mount Saint Vincent University, to improve students' motivation to read and write by increasing parent participation in children's literacy learning from grades Primary-6.

The program aims to:

- involve parents in the creation of books for and with children
- improve the quality and degree of parent involvement in school-related literacy activities
- establish a self-sustaining publishing centre in the target community
- create and share prototype materials and templates through which locally written materials can be developed
- build collaborative relationships among stakeholders that will foster sharing of expertise, resources, and best practices; create an infrastructure, including the development of local leaders, in order to ensure sustainability
- disseminate project details and results to parents, educators and community stakeholders related to writing, producing, and using culturally relevant, high-interest materials in the literacy-centered classroom and the home setting. This knowledge transfer will include opportunities to raise awareness of the relationship between early reading and writing and the importance of parent involvement.

### **Creation of Swing Set Press**

The first *Publish It!* publishing centre was housed in the Cambridge and District Elementary School. Swing Set Press began operation in November, 2007. It was

named by students and housed in the school's computer lab. A computer, printer and scanner were dedicated to the publishing aspect, while the school's computers were used by families for composing and editing. Two part-time coordinators were hired. They staffed the centre and were instrumental in recruiting parent participation and ensuring parent success. They helped families with the creation process and with technical needs. They also encouraged participation and made the initial contacts with families. Their encouragement and support to families was key.

### Family book making

Parents were invited into the school, by pre-arranged appointment, to work with their children to make non-fiction picture books. Training sessions for parents were offered to help parents learn how to create the books with their children and in the use of the computer technology (Microsoft Word and PowerPoint). Templates and prototypes were developed with small groups of teachers, parents and children and were used in the workshop sessions. Photos of the local area, businesses, activities, etc., were taken by parents and children and used to support the text they wrote together. In some cases, families supplied their own family photographs that they then learned to scan into their project. The families learned how to use word-processing programs to insert their photos and text to publish their books. In addition to the book going home to the family, the books became part of the classroom and school libraries and will be used in workshops and for classroom instruction and home support in year two. Families were also given the opportunity to order additional copies at a minimal cost which many did.

**Collaborative relationship:** A collaborative relationship was established among the project staff, partners and families. Local leaders were cultivated from participating parents. In the second year of operation, Swingset Press is run totally by volunteers.

**Dissemination:** Dissemination activities included press coverage of the project in the local paper, notices home, the creation of a website with downloadable books, information on the project and links to related sites. A book launch was held with parents, children and invited guests. Several families read their books to the audience and spoke of their positive experience in the project and their desire to see it continue.

## **METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION**

A team of researchers (1 BEd student assistant and 2 Graduate research assistants) supervised by Dr. Jane Baskwill, Mount Saint Vincent University, evaluated the project. Information sources were the participants and the program facilitators. Telephone interviews were conducted with 75 of the participating families following the publication of a book (See attached telephone questionnaire). Data gathered included program delivery and process data, parental attitudes towards the activity, impact of the project on the family, degree of overall satisfaction with the project, perceived benefits of the project to the school, willingness to continue, and willingness to help others.

## KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS [CAMBRIDGE]

This section reports on the key findings and is representative of the content analysis of the telephone questionnaires. (Note: Unless otherwise indicated, the term “families” refers to the adult in the household who answered the telephone and responded to the questionnaire. Overwhelmingly, these were mothers.)

- Families were overwhelmingly in support of this project. There was **not one** negative response to the questions asked. Even though some parents said they would still need help with the technology, all parents said they would participate again and wanted to see the project continue. Only one family declined to answer the questionnaire.
- All expressed benefits for their child – i.e. self esteem, motivation to read, interaction with friends and family, learning, sharing their culture, etc.
- Fourteen of the respondents volunteered to help run the Centre next year. Some volunteered to make books with children whose parents did not participate.
- Eighteen families spoke about the importance of the books to their family’s emotional well-being. They expressed how writing books about grandparents and loved ones and pets that died helped their family with the grieving process and that their book was a lasting tribute to family members. Other books filled a similar need: dealing with a serious illness and hospitalization, providing foster care, meeting the needs of children who are special for a variety of reasons (learning needs, physical needs).
- Thirty two families commented on the learning of the adults in the family. These included the improvement of skills such as spelling, grammar and punctuation, the learning of new skills such as word processing, and learning how to help their child with the writing.
- Twelve of the families reported an increase in the participation of dads in reading at home and eighteen dads who were interviewed expressed notable enthusiasm for the project.
- Eight families said interest had been expressed to them by friends in other school districts to see this project come to their children’s schools. They showed their friends the book they had made and this prompted the response.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations focus on the factors that contributed to the success of this project in year one as identified by the parents, school staff, coordinators and the steering committee. The table below summarizes these.

Factors	Comments
Staff	<p>Having the coordinators on site to help with the composing process and the publishing, as well as to develop and maintain the website was key. They were able to work our any technological glitches and to establish communication with families and grow interest in the project. Their presence in the school, even part-time, encouraged teachers to show support for the project with their families.</p>
Steering Committee	<p>Having a steering committee of the partners insured communication and provided support for the coordinators. Members of the Annapolis Valley First Nations were on the committee which was important for cultivating a relationship between the partners and this community.</p>
Facilities	<p>Housing the Swing Set Press publishing centre in a school gave the project ready access and contact with the target population.</p>

Several obstacles were encountered. These are summarized below.

Factors	Comments (factors which caused these problems and how they were solved)
Contact issues:	For reasons of confidentiality and privacy, third party contact had to be established first. This slowed down the process until all permissions could be secured.
Weather:	Some writing workshops had to be cancelled and rescheduled due to weather. In the interim, family situations changed and a few were not able to participate.
Technology:	It took longer than expected to work out the publishing aspect in order to keep it simple enough for families to do and yet produce a quality product.

It will be important to address each of these obstacles in year two of implementation along with the following recommendations based on the data:

- Open the publishing centre earlier in the school year before weather becomes a factor.
- Hire or appoint a volunteer coordinator to maintain consistency and oversee all operations.
- Contact parents who volunteered to help in the centre and have a meeting as early as possible.
- Establish a schedule and specific roles and duties.
- Contact families from the established list first to avoid delays.
- Provide new families with information about the project and show samples of published books.
- Seek sustainable funding to prevent interruption of service.
- Continue to monitor satisfaction with the program through third party interviews.
- Involve school staff in finding opportunities to use the published books in the classroom.
- Provide workshops for parents on how to decide on a topic, how to collaborate

with their child on the writing, how to use a story map, etc.

- Continue to focus on producing quality, non-fiction books that are as error free as possible. The pedagogical usefulness of these in both the home and school should be emphasized.

## **PROGRAM EXPANSION I**

### **Gaspereau**

In September, 2008, the *Publish It!* program expanded to a second school site, Gaspereau School (GrapeVine Press). The publishing centre was named by students and housed in the Gaspereau Elementary School. As there is no computer lab, classrooms and the school library were the sites of the book-making activity. There were 4 computers available in each room. The school Library was the primary book-making site. A computer, printer and scanner were dedicated to the publishing aspect, while the schools computers were used by families for composing and editing. Two part- time coordinators were hired who staffed the project and were instrumental in the success of the project. They helped families with the creation process and with technical needs. They also encouraged participation and made the initial contacts with families.

Family book making: Parents were invited to make an appointment with the facilitators to work with their children to help make non-fiction picture books. Training sessions for volunteers were offered to help parents and community members learn how to create the books with families and in the use of the computer technology (Microsoft Word and PowerPoint). Templates and prototypes developed previously for Publish It at Cambridge were used at the Gaspereau site. Photos of the local area, businesses, activities, etc., were taken by parents and children and used to support the text they wrote together. In some cases, families supplied their own family photographs, that they then learned to scan into their project. The families learned how to use word-processing programs to insert their photos and text to publish their books. In addition to the book going home to the family, the books became part of the classroom and school libraries. Families were also given the opportunity to order additional copies at cost which many did.

Collaborative relationship: A collaborative relationship was established among the project staff, partners and families and with the volunteer coordinators at the Cambridge site.

Dissemination: Dissemination activities included press coverage of the project in the local paper, notices home, the expansion of the original Publish It! Website to include the books created at the Gaspereau site. In addition to the books, the website contains information on the project and links to related sites. A book launch was held with parents, children and invited guests. Several families read their books to the audience and spoke of their positive experience in the project and their desire to see it continue.

## **METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION**

A team of researchers (1 BEd student assistant and 2 Graduate research assistants) supervised by Dr. Jane Baskwill, Mount Saint Vincent University, evaluated the project. Information sources were the participants and the program facilitators. Telephone interviews were conducted with 45 of the participating families following the publication of a book (See attached telephone questionnaire). Ten families declined to answer the questionnaire, while five did not return phone calls.

Data gathered included program delivery and process data, parental attitudes towards the activity, impact of the project on the family, degree of overall satisfaction with the project, perceived benefits of the project to the participant and the school, willingness to continue, and willingness to help others.

## KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS [GASPEREAU]

This section reports on the key findings and is representative of the content analysis of the telephone questionnaires. (Note: Unless otherwise indicated, the term “families” refers to the adult in the household who answered the telephone and responded to the questionnaire. Overwhelmingly, these were mothers.)

Families were very supportive of this project. Most said they would participate again. Although five families said they didn't know if they would make another book in the future, most said they would and also gave additional comments as indicated below:

- Yes. Because the support is there.
- It develops an appreciation for literacy and gave XXX a feeling of pride and ownership and helps develop an affinity for reading.
- Because we know how to do it now, but if only the school has the program – then there.
- At school it was interesting to read the other stories. XXX wanted to sign out other stories and found the other experiences interesting. I found it interesting in how XXX's work compared to others in regards to his personal development and hearing/reading the other stories was also interesting. I would also make a book at home if XXX is interested because it would allow for more time for him to work independently.
- Because of the software and computer access it was all very easy.
- It promotes literacy, hands on learning and helps build self-confidence.

Fifteen families said it would depend on their child's interest in making another book.

Although all parents said they wanted to see the project continue, most families said they were not likely going to be able to help. Two of the respondents volunteered to help with bookmaking next year.

Most expressed benefits for their child – i.e. self esteem, motivation to read, pride.

Twenty-five families spoke about what they learned from the experience. The following is representative of what participants identified as having learned:

- How easy it is to do these things.
- How to use the template and an increased comfort level with the computer. I also enjoyed XXX's feeling of power over her book input.
- I thought it would have been nice if XXX would have participated more, thus be a mother/son experience.
- Grouping pictures together and working/having fun with other children.
- My observations while making the book is that more children need literacy experiences/support. I had to help others with their books.
- The concept and mechanism of how to write a book and develop a title.

- If I were to do this again I would take more time and give XXX more opportunity to be more independent in his story development. If I would have done this the 1<sup>st</sup> time I feel XXX would have learned more.
- Social links because of my work I don't always get to do things at the school, but this was in the evening and I could make it.
- Not to take information at face value (the length of time to make the book), because we realized how easy it was. I also learned to be patient and allow XXX the opportunity to make decisions and discover the process and take charge.
- Computer skills.

Three families said interest had been expressed to them by friends in other schools to see this project come to their children's schools. They showed their friends the book they had made and this prompted the response.

Most had no reservations; however, among the eleven who had, the following is representative of their comments:

- XXX is a child with developmental delays and I was apprehensive on how the project would go, but once there, I was quickly relieved because there was lots of support and 2 of XXX's aunts came too.
- I was concerned about signing the release to publish form because the pictures in the book were really personal, but I saw other people signing the release and they had personal pictures too and I thought okay.
- I wasn't sure of the time commitment needed, but once I knew that it was a short time – no problem.

Most additional comments were in support of the project with some providing additional recommendations. Of note was the reference to the public release form. The process should perhaps be reviewed at this site prior to the start of Year II.

- Neat to see the excitement around the books and have them being signed out of the library and read by others.
- Allow yourself time so you won't feel rushed and enjoy the experience. If your child has a short attention span, be patient and let them pick the pictures.
- It was a good outreach to the community and reading/writing opportunity.
- This project is a worthwhile venture and other schools should do it.
- The finished product looked quite nice!
- Good Idea! It gets parents involved with the school other than attending concerts.
- Very helpful and easy to do.
- To better explain the public release form. I wonder how 'far' do these books travel? Or is it just a school community book?

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations focus on the factors that contributed to the success of this project in year one as identified by the parents, school staff, coordinators and the steering committee, along with the obstacles. The tables below summarize these.

Factors	Comments
Staff	<p>Having the coordinators on site to help with the composing process and the publishing, as well as to develop and maintain the website was key. They were able to work our any technological glitches and to establish communication with families and grow interest in the project. Their presence in the school, even part-time, encouraged teachers to show support for the project with their families.</p>
Steering Committee	<p>Although membership was small, having a steering committee of the partners insured communication and provided support for the coordinators.</p>
Facilities	<p>Housing the Grapevine Press publishing centre in the school gave the project ready access and contact with the target population.</p>
Procedure	<p>This project benefited from the work of the previous one and helped to streamline the process. In turn the project was able to be implemented more easily.</p>
Peer Support	<p>The volunteer co-ordinator from Swingset Press shared information with the Gaspereau group.</p>

Several obstacles were encountered. These are summarized below.

Factors	Comments (factors which caused these problems)
Contact issues:	<p>For reasons of confidentiality and privacy, third party contact continues to slow down the process somewhat.</p>

Forms, permissions and communication:	The comment about the public release form came up four times at this site and no times at the previous site, so is worth looking into further with respect to process and communication. This, along with the suggestions referring to meetings for choosing a title and learning to use the templates, seems to indicate that the information may not be getting out there sufficiently or were impacted by the timeline and the forms used.
Timeline:	To avoid weather issues the timeline was compacted so books could be made prior to January. This caused stress on the coordinators to complete books in that time. It also resulted in a delayed Launch until the New Year. This resulted in a reduction of momentum for continuing the publishing of books with volunteers. Families seemed to see this as a gift-making project rather than an on-going opportunity.
Technology:	Not having a networked computer system, along with difficulty with printer ink, caused some difficulties for families and for coordinators.

It will be important to address each of these obstacles in year two of implementation along with the following recommendations based on the data:

- Open the publishing centre early and spread out the publishing over the school year. Slow down the process.
- Hire or appoint a volunteer coordinator to maintain consistency and oversee all operations.
- Advertise early and try to find ways to regain the momentum from the Fall.
- Help families understand why they should publish more than one book.
- Establish a schedule and specific roles and duties early.
- Revise permission forms and ensure families understand who will be able to contact them and the public nature of the project.
- Expand the Steering Committee and try to insure it is representative of the school and community.
- Provide new families with information about the project and show samples of published books.

- Seek sustainable funding to prevent interruption of service.
- Continue to monitor satisfaction with the program through third party interviews.
- Involve school staff in finding opportunities to use the published books in the classroom.
- Provide workshops for parents on how to decide on a topic, how to collaborate with their child on the writing, how to use a story map, etc.
- Continue to focus on producing quality, non-fiction books that are as error free as possible. The pedagogical usefulness of these in both the home and school should be emphasized.

## PROJECT EXPANSION II

### Lawrencetown

In September 2009, *Publish It! Children and Parents – Partners in Learning*, was implemented with slight variation in the communities that make up the catchment area of the Lawrencetown Consolidated School [Riverside Press]. Not limited to families whose children attend Lawrencetown School, at this site books are being written by families with children who are older, as well as younger. Copies of each book can also be found in the Frank W. Morse Library, part of the Annapolis Valley Regional Library system. Project evaluation is forthcoming.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The results of this evaluation are evidence that ***Publish It! Children and Parents – Partners in Learning*** has positively impacted on the school, the families, and the community partners in the following ways:

1. An important link was made for families to the importance of writing to support children's reading.
2. There has been a heightened awareness of the value of bookmaking as a family activity.
3. Networks were forged among the partners and with the families.
4. There is greater awareness of local literacy programs offered for adults by the Valley Community Learning Association (VCLA) and how to access them. One such program was offered by VCLA at the school in the evening.

Judging from the responses of the participants, the project is achieving its goals and meeting the needs of participating families. There is more to be learned through continued implementation of ***Publish It! Children and Parents – Partners in Learning*** in a variety of settings, ongoing improvement and adaptation of delivery methods to different participants and settings, and further evaluation of its effectiveness.