

"A GREAT PROGRAM... FOR ME AS A
GRAMMA": CAREGIVERS EVALUATE A
FAMILY LITERACY INITIATIVE

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In this article, we report a study in which we asked 137 parents and caregivers to evaluate a year-long family literacy program in which they participated. Parents valued the insights they gained about children's learning in general and literacy development in particular. They reported that they learned from each other as well as from the program facilitators; valued especially the structure of the program wherein they spent time working with children in classrooms; felt more included in the school community; and enhanced their self-esteem and their ability to advocate for their families.

Key words: families, literacy, school, family literacy, Parents As Literacy Supporters (PALS)

Les auteurs présentent les résultats d'une recherche durant laquelle ils ont demandé à 137 parents et ou tuteurs d'évaluer un programme de littératie familiale auquel ils avaient participé durant un an. Les parents se sont dits heureux d'avoir pu ainsi mieux comprendre comment leurs enfants apprennent en général et en particulier comment leur littératie se développe. Ils ont signalé qu'ils ont appris de leur enfant et vice versa ainsi que des facilitateurs. Ils ont aimé la structure du programme qui leur a permis de travailler avec les enfants en classe. Ils se sentent ainsi davantage impliqués dans l'école et l'expérience leur a permis d'avoir plus confiance en eux-mêmes et en leur aptitude à se faire les avocats de leur famille.

Mots clés : familles, littératie, école, littératie familiale, Parents As Literacy Supporters (PALS)

The publication of Denny Taylor's (1983) classic *Family Literacy* precipitated an explosion of interest in the family as a site for young children's literacy learning. Descriptive and ethnographic research (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) demonstrated that across socio-cultural groups, families can be rich contexts for children's early literacy development. As a result of this research, family literacy programs designed to support children's learning at home proliferated (Purcell-Gates, 2000). In her review of the research in family literacy, Purcell-Gates (2000) reported a dearth of empirical work in this area and called for continued research to document the different and complex ways in which literacy is learned, taught, and practised in families. Moreover, Edwards (2003) argued that this gap in the research exists because researchers have not asked participants whether or not family literacy programs benefit them. This study, in which we canvassed a group of parents with whom we worked in the Parents As Literacy Supporters (PALS) program (Anderson & Morrison, 2000), addresses the gap that Edwards and Purcell-Gates have identified.

THE CONTEXT

PALS began when the mayor of a small city in British Columbia invited us to lead the development of a family literacy program in economically depressed, inner-city areas as part of an inter-agency, community development initiative. Parents, early childhood educators, and administrators were involved in the development of the program.

Designed for three to five year olds and their parents and/or other caregivers, PALS¹ consists of 10 to 15, two-hour sessions usually held every two weeks, commencing in October and ending in May. In most schools that implement the program, the kindergarten teacher facilitates the program. We negotiate the particular time and day for the sessions with the participants; for example, in some communities, sessions occur in the evening to accommodate families where parents work outside the home. Session topics typically include learning the alphabet, early mathematics development, computers/technology and learning, learning to write, environmental print (e.g., product names and labels, traffic signs, etc.), and reading with children. Each session begins with the families, facilitators, and teachers sharing a meal together. Then, the

facilitator and the parents spend about one-half hour discussing the topic (e.g., early writing) that is the focus of the session while the children go to their classroom(s). During this part of the session, parents are encouraged to share their own experiences with the topic at hand and their observations of their children's engagement in that particular aspect of early literacy. Parents, children, and teachers (or facilitators) then spend an hour in the classroom(s) at a number of literacy and learning centres, each containing a different activity reflecting the topic of the day. Sessions conclude with the parents and facilitators discussing what they observed about the children's learning and possibilities for continuing, expanding, and reinforcing that learning at home and in the community. Parents are then presented with a book or other materials and resources such as mathematics activities and games. About a third of the sessions are kept open so that topics and issues that parents identify can be addressed. For example, the parents in one school requested a second session on computer technology while in another school, parents wanted a session devoted to the impact of television on children. Books, art materials such as crayons, glue, scissors, and writing materials such as pencils, paper, and markers are provided to the families so that over the course of the program, they accumulate a set of resources. Different possibilities for using these materials are discussed; however, great care is also taken to honour and value what parents already did with their children, and for example, no effort is made to teach parents to read to their children in particular or prescribed ways. In addition, we attempt to highlight and draw from the *funds of knowledge* (Moll, Amanti, & Gonzalez, 1992) that families bring to the program. Parents discuss the literacy practices in their homes and communities and share their own literacy experiences in and out of school. We also take care to encourage, promote, and value the literacy activities and practices that families engage in at home and in the community.

Several points need elaboration here. Although we use the term *parents* (which we will henceforth use in this article as a proxy for adult participants), grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles, and other caregivers sometimes participated. Although we designed the program for four and five years old, some parents brought along infants; it was

not uncommon to have two and three year olds participating. Finally, participation was entirely voluntary and no coercion or pressure – subtle or otherwise – was used. When some parents were unable to attend sessions, we included their children in all of the activities by working alongside those parents who were present.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Several theoretical perspectives inform the PALS program and this study. First, our work is informed by a *literacy as social practices* paradigm (e.g., Heath, 1983; Street, 1995). From this perspective, we viewed literacy not only as an amalgam of cognitive and linguistic skills transferable from one context to another, but also as complex social practices that vary contextually. A decade ago, Clay (1993), summarizing this perspective, argued that the meanings ascribed to literacy, the value placed on it, and how it is acquired and mediated, vary from one context to another. This perspective manifested itself in several ways in the PALS program. For example, one teacher who was of indigenous ancestry and who worked with First Nations families incorporated a range of Aboriginal artwork that her brother, an artist, donated to the program. In another community, storytelling by First Nations elders was an integral part of the program. One school that had a very large Punjabi speaking population ran its sessions in the evening when most parents were able to attend; the sessions were conducted in Punjabi and the Punjabi-speaking teachers modified the activities. Parents in some groups eschewed storybooks, preferring to share how-to books and other informational texts with their children. We encourage and support these different literacy practices.

Our work was also guided by research that suggests that children from non-mainstream homes and communities tend not to do as well in literacy (and schooling in general) because of a lack of shared understanding between the home and school (Au & Kawakami, 1994). For example, in an earlier study, Anderson (1995) found that although the Euro-Canadian families that he interviewed favoured the constructivist, play-based perspective that informs curriculum and pedagogy in British Columbia, the newly immigrated, Chinese families that he interviewed favoured highly structured approaches with heavy

reliance on rote memorization that they had experienced in their own learning. Fitzgerald, Spiegel, and Cunningham (1991) reported that the working class parents in their study favoured a skills orientation, whereas the middle class parents held perceptions consistent with an emergent literacy view. As we see it, then, there is often incommensurability (Inghilleri, 1999) or lack of shared understanding between how literacy is taught and promoted at school and how it is taught and promoted in children's homes and communities; this lack of shared understanding can have a negative impact on children's literacy learning and their educational opportunities. Cognizant of this important work, we aimed to create in PALS an inter-subjective space where families and educators could learn from each other.

According to Inghilleri (1999), "[t]he notion of incommensurability is often taken to establish both incompatibility and incomparability between different cultural groups" (p. 133). We acknowledge the phenomenological perspective that one's lifeworld or one's lived experiences shape the "cultural maps and assumptions in the substructure of our thought and action" (Crossley, 1996, p. 11). However, as we developed and implemented PALS, we were guided by the belief that parents and teachers would come to understand each other and develop mutual understanding of ways to support children's early development if we created a safe space where they could work collaboratively.

Emerging work in multiple literacies or multimodalities (Kress, 2001) also guided our work. That is, we acknowledge that literacy extends beyond encoding and decoding print to include various forms to represent meaning (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). For example, when we met with parents in focus groups as we conceptualized the program, we were very pleased that parents indicated that they would like to learn more about technology, or as they put it, "computers." Furthermore, parents requested, and we developed and included a session on children's early mathematical learning, paying attention to Eisner's (1991) notion that "literacy is broadly speaking the ability to encode and decode meaning in any of the forms used in culture to represent meaning" (p.14).

Also framing our work is the foundational work of Vygotsky (1987) and other socio-cultural learning theorists (e.g., Wertsch, 1985). Each session began with parents and facilitators sharing what they already knew about, and their experience with, the topic at hand. For example, in the session on learning to read, participants recounted their own memories of basal readers, they described their young children's pretend reading of favourite books, or they recalled the frustrations of a classmate or relative who struggled with learning to read. The in-class portion of sessions when parents and other caregivers and children worked collaboratively through a series of literacy centres embodied an apprenticeship model (Rogoff, 1990). That is, the parents and caregivers provided the necessary support but "handed-off" tasks to the children when they were capable of completing them independently. In the debriefing that culminated each session, the group reflected on what they observed and learned. The learning that consolidated here was highly social.

And finally, we were mindful of important work in critical literacy (e.g., Baker & Luke, 1991). Although literacy can be transformative and liberating (Freire, 1997), it can also serve hegemonic roles in perpetuating inequity in terms of gender, social class, and so forth. We acknowledged the fact that literacy is often oversold and does not necessarily equate to well being – socially, personally or economically (Graff, 1995).

METHOD

We drew on the responses of 137 parents from five PALS sites in five inner city schools located in low-SES areas; three of the five schools had free-lunch programs. Most (about 90 %) of the parents were Caucasian and spoke English as their first language. The remainder were recently immigrated Chinese, El Salvadoran, Korean, Vietnamese, Iranian, or Romanian, and some First Nations parents. All members of the latter groups, however, were facile with English.

Approximately 200 parents attended PALS sessions in the five schools; the attendance rate at each session averaged 90 per cent. On the days we collected our data, 137 of the 180 parents in attendance chose to respond, a participation rate of 76 per cent. Because the responses were completely voluntary and anonymous, we had no way of following up

and ascertaining why some parents chose not to respond. Based on informal feedback throughout the year, we were quite confident that the responses we received were representative.

In the penultimate or ninth session with each group of parents, we asked them to write to us anonymously to tell us about the program: its strengths and its limitations; what worked and what needed changing; what they had learned and what they would like to have learned, and so forth² We first discussed the purposes of the responses, and then provided the parents with one sheet of paper with the open-ended prompt, "PALS was" There was no expectation that parents "had to" write to us: as explained previously, we did not account for who wrote and who did not and we assured the participants anonymity and confidentiality. We provided time (about ½ hour) for parents to write their responses. To ensure anonymity, we had the participants place the responses sheets, whether they were completed or not, in a box as they left the session.

As might be expected, the amount that parents wrote varied considerably. Some parents wrote only a sentence or two, others wrote several pages. We read the data set in its entirety, identifying themes that emerged (Glaser, 1998). A Graduate Research Assistant trained in Early Childhood Education coded the data according to the themes that we had identified. Then we, as researchers, coded about 50 per cent of the data and compared our results with the research assistant's coding. We had an inter-rater agreement of 91 per cent and reconciled differences after discussion.

RESULTS

Several themes emerged from the data analysis. However, most of the responses fell into the following themes listed in order of frequency: a) structure of the program; b) supporting children's learning; c) social relationships; d) capacity building; and e) one-on-one time. A number of concerns and issues also arose that we share.

Table 1: Frequency of Themes

Theme	Number of parents identifying theme
Structure of program/Creating an inter-subjective space	456
Supporting children's learning	109
Capacity building	45
Social relationships	27
One-to-one time	16
Other	31

Structure of the Program: Creating an Inter-subjective Space

As noted in Table 1, the most frequent responses centred on the structure of the program, responses about creating an inter-subjective space. For example, parents commented on the social dimension of the food sharing and the value of the debriefing that occurred after the in-class portion of each session. However, most comments centred on the time caregivers spent in the classroom working with their children. As might be expected, some parents reported that their children looked forward to their bi-weekly visits; for example, one parent remarked, "My son loved coming and having me being in a class with him." The classroom visits also helped parents develop an understanding of current pedagogy and as one participant wrote, "A great program of information especially for me as a 'Gramma' seeing I've been out of the school system for quite a long time and there's always a lot of changes made to methods of teaching." Furthermore, the in-class aspect of the program allowed parents to have a much better understanding of teachers' work as the following quotation suggests: "First I would like to say this program

opened my eyes wide to how important kindergarten teachers are and how hard it is.”³.

Supporting Children’s Learning

Obviously, given the focus on literacy in PALS, a second theme that emerged was the insights parents gained into children’s literacy learning. Curriculum and instruction in British Columbia where the study took place are informed by the guide, *Primary Program: A Framework for Teaching* (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2000). This guide reflects a child-centered orientation to teaching and learning and an emergent literacy perspective in terms of understanding and promoting children’s early literacy development. For example, children’s pretend reading and invented spelling were seen as important facets of children’s literacy learning, to be celebrated and encouraged. The teachers in this study were attempting to reflect these principles in their program sessions. Earlier research with working class parents (Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991) and new immigrant parents (Anderson, 1995) has suggested that they tend to value and promote a traditional skills-based approach to early reading and writing instruction and eschew an emergent literacy perspective. Here, in contrast, the parents reported on the insights they gained about the developmental nature of learning to read and write in English.

“They loved trying to make letters and just be able to write whether it made sense or not.”

“D [Child’s name] now tries to read with me, he asks me what words say. He never did that before.”

“The information on working with your child at home encouragement and correcting them in an encouraging manner (or rather not correcting) was particularly helpful.”

“All M ever wanted to do was play. Now I know that’s okay! That was a real eye opener for me.”

Several points bear elaboration here. First, the parents developed an appreciation for the emergent nature of literacy learning. As well, parents came to value play in young children’s learning. It seems important that we helped parents who have had very different

experiences in school see the value of play, if pedagogy is going to reflect a play-based orientation. The concrete manner in which that learning occurred in this study seems to be an avenue through which to support such understanding.

Capacity Building

An overarching goal of PALS was to ensure that capacity building was an inherent part of the program. We see capacity building being manifested in several ways in this study. First, parents reported that PALS helped them gain confidence in their own abilities. As one parent wrote, "This program not only made a difference with kids but I think it helped the parents by making a difference in self-insecurities and being able to communicate with other adults and laughing and relating to the same everyday dilemmas in everyday situations." Tett and Crowther (1998) have argued that because many participants in family literacy programs often come from marginalized groups and tend to lack self-esteem, family literacy providers need to address the issue of their insecurity. We achieved this understanding in PALS by creating a respectful and caring environment where parents' and children's literacy practices were affirmed and valued. Secondly, as parents became familiar with the methods of the schools, they gained confidence in their own abilities. One parent commented, "PALS has certainly encouraged me to stay very involved in my children and their schooling."⁴ Furthermore, although family literacy programs are also critiqued because of the supposed one-way transmission of school culture and practices to parents, such was not the case in our study. Indeed, parents saw their relationship with the schools as much more reciprocal as the following quotations demonstrate.

"A great program...gave us a chance to be able to discuss your own views or input into your child's education."

"PALS has certainly encouraged me to stay very involved in my children and their schooling."

Social Relationships

As has been touched on and alluded to in the previous themes, parents also saw PALS as important in forming and maintaining social relationships. They shared the following perspectives.

“Being in PALS made me feel like part of something.”

“I believe the program has benefited both the school and community.”

“PALS fosters communication between parents and school staff which will promote the children’s learning.”

Parents in communities such as those in which we worked are often thought of as “hard to reach.” As we worked with families, we found that they were not hard to reach, an achievement of the PALS program. It was obvious to us that the safe environment that we had created where everyone’s contribution and participation were valued had done much to create social cohesion within the groups. Parents told us that through the relationships developed in PALS, they supported each other in childcare, in sharing resources, and in other challenges they faced. Furthermore, they indicated that they “learned from each other” as they shared their experiences while sharing food at the initial part of each session or over a tea or coffee in the debriefing session. Parents also began to see the school as part of the larger community and that communications between the community and the school need to be developed and enhanced⁵. Epstein (2002) and others have argued that communication between home and school is a crucial area that needs attention in most schools. From what the parents reported to us, PALS was an effective vehicle in promoting two-way communication that we agree is essential in supplanting the tendency on the part of schools to be concerned only with disseminating information to families.

One-on-one Time

Another value that parents attributed to the program was that it afforded them the opportunity to work in a one-to-one context with their children. One parent explained, “It [each session] is also a nice one to one time with my daughter.” Another commented, “We did enjoy the time together and are thankful for the opportunity.” In our ongoing

discussions with parents, they indicated that they lived incredibly busy lives with many of the parents holding down multiple jobs out of economic necessity. Those who had more than one child also indicated that, although they valued the time in which they shared communally with their children, they also felt it important to attempt to find time to spend time individually with each child, especially as the child made the critical transition to kindergarten. Interestingly, some indicated that their participation not only afforded them the opportunity to work with their children who were in kindergarten but also reaffirmed their commitment to set aside time from their busy schedules to spend time individually with their other children. Indeed, one parent observed that working individually with her child had "Started a bond ... working together which will help in early years of schooling." Implicit in some of the literature (e.g., Tett & Crowther, 1998) is the notion that family literacy programs are imbued with middle class values and place a burden of guilt on busy families, who, for various reasons, do not set aside, one-on-one "quality time," an exalted tenet of parenting in post-modernity. In our conversations with parents, however, we did not get a sense that they were feeling burdened with guilt. Indeed, many of the parents told us that given the competing demands of work, chores at home, and attending to the needs of two or more children, they knew one-on-one time would be available only at PALS sessions and they valued it. That is, they did not feel guilty because they were unable to provide one-on-one time at home for various reasons. But they saw the value of working one on one with their children in the PALS sessions and were pleased that they could do so there.

Concern and Issues

Although parents were generally positive in their evaluation of the program, they raised concerns and issues. For example, one parent felt too much time was devoted to "socializing"; this parent felt that the time could have been spent more productively working with the children or learning from the facilitator.

As was indicated earlier, we attempted to reflect a multi-modal or multi-literacies perspective in the program in a number of ways, including the provision of wordless picture books. We believed that such

texts could serve as a stimulus for families more comfortable with story telling than book reading. Furthermore, we thought that these books might also be welcomed by any parents who might not read English but who wanted to share books with their children. We also took time to discuss possibilities for using wordless picture books, avoiding being prescriptive. Nevertheless, some parents complained that these books were not appropriate. They saw the lack of print as a problem and also thought the books were "too easy." Interestingly, some parents did not see the relevance of the Environmental Print walk where we took the children and their parents around the neighbour identifying the ubiquitous signs, notices, labels, and logos. Previous research (e.g., Anderson, 1995) has also suggested that parents seem to equate literacy development with knowledge about print and much less on the "big picture" (Purcell-Gates, 1996) of literacy development. For some parents at least, a more traditional focus on print in family literacy programs might be more meaningful for them than attempting to have them embrace a more expansive, multiple literacy perspective, at least initially.

In a related vein, some parents felt that there should be more focus on "readiness" and on "reading skills." When we initially met with parents in the focus group sessions as we began to conceptualise and develop PALS, they identified "learning the alphabet" and "learning about sounds" as areas they wanted to learn more about. Consequently, we developed sessions around the themes of "Learning the Alphabet," "Learning to Read," and "Riddle, Raps and Rhymes" (with a focus on activities that support the development of phonological awareness in developmentally sound ways). Some parents suggested that we provide follow-up activities for them to work on with their children. When we had parents recall their own memories of learning to read in the initial part of our program, some of them recalled worksheets and basal readers. These memories influenced the desire of at least some to provide their children with similar activities that apparently worked for them. We tried to demonstrate that children learn in different ways and at different rates along a developmental continuum (e.g., Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Perhaps influenced by the trend toward using standardized assessment with young children, some parents had difficulty accepting this conception of early literacy learning, wanting clear demarcations of

where children "should be," according to age or grade level. Typical of this perspective was the parent who wrote, "I would like to know more about what is required for a child to begin kindergarten and what should be learned by the end of the school [kindergarten] year."

Many participants commented on the respectful nature of the program and the care that we took to be inclusive. Despite our best efforts and the commitment to issues of social justice with which we attempted to imbue the program, issues of social class arose. As noted previously, three of the schools had a school lunch program indicating that a significant number of the families were low income. However, two of the schools also drew from middle-class areas and issues of social class were raised at these sites, directly and sometimes more subtly. Two of the parents in one of the schools, indicated, "...good program. I think very beneficial for the original target group. At [Name of School] perhaps preaching to the converted [in this school]" and "a great idea for inner-city schools but perhaps [Name of School] is not the most appropriate." However, the majority of the parents in the same school wrote such comments as "Really, we need this kind of program" and "This program should be in every school."

We were quite open in sharing the development and evolution of PALS including the fact that the program started initially in two inner city schools. Furthermore, we discussed issues of race and social class and to reiterate, the program was founded on principles of respect and reciprocity. It appears, however, that even with our best efforts, we needed to do more in terms of issues of social justice.

Some parents identified recruitment to the program as an issue needing attention. We recruited parents to PALS in the five sites in several ways including an information session held in the spring for parents of incoming kindergarten children; invitations in school newsletters; reminders in the local paper; and word of mouth of parents already in the program (which parents tell us is the most effective form of recruitment for a program such as this). We also tried to schedule sessions that best fitted the needs of the community. However, family participation is voluntary and despite our best attempts at flexibility and invitation and promotion, some families did not participate either by choice or because no adult was available to attend sessions because of

work commitments and so forth. Because a small portion of the costs of PALS came from the schools' budgets (a large part of the cost is covered through fund raising, small grants, or philanthropic organizations), some participants raised concerns that not all parents availed themselves of the opportunity to participate. This sentiment was captured by a parent who wrote, "[PALS was] really great BUT I'm wondering if it is the best use of school district funds?"

DISCUSSION

Those who have critiqued family literacy programs (e.g., Auerbach, 1995) gave us cause to be reflective as we conceptualised, developed, and implemented PALS. We believe our work reflects the importance of respecting the social-cultural contexts where families live and work and play, of collaborating with families and communities in program design and implementation, and of the need for flexibility and reciprocity. Although we appreciate and are influenced by these critical perspectives, we agree with Edwards (2003) that it is also vital to listen to the perspectives and insights from the families themselves.

The results of this study indicate that parents learned much about literacy and about children's learning and they highlighted the social-contextual nature of that learning. Several points need to be emphasized here. First, working with the children in classrooms seemed especially valuable; this approach is in keeping with a constructivist view of learning. Second, although parents highly regarded the role of the program facilitator in helping to develop their understanding, they also indicated that they learned from each other. Based on her studies of how siblings support each other's literacy learning, Gregory (2001) suggested that educators rethink the traditional notion that only adults support young children's learning. She argued that young children play a similar supportive role in what she terms a "...synergy whereby siblings act as adjuvants, stimulating and fostering each others' development" (p. 301). We saw a parallel here because parents learned informally from each other.

Although some parents tended to have a traditional view of literacy as reading and writing as they remembered it in school, most parents became comfortable with a more expansive and contemporary view. For

example, after we had been on an environmental print walk in one of the communities, many parents commented on how unaware they had been of the ubiquitous print in their environment and how reading signs, logos, and so forth was so much a part of everyday experiences. Extending their experiences from the session on environmental print, some families went home and of their own volition created books out of labels. And in one school, families requested a second session on early mathematics learning while in another, they requested a second session on technology.

It might be inferred from some of the literature that participants in family literacy programs are uncritical consumers of information provided by such programs, without any sense of agency (Segal, 1991). This was not the case with PALS. Some parents wanted more information about points made when discussing different aspects of children's learning. For example, one parent requested that we share research on children's literacy development. Others objected to some of the books we provided, requesting that they have input into book selection, an idea that we are pursuing. At other times, parents questioned some of the practices we were discussing. For example, in one session, we shared a videotape produced by a leading literacy organization that promoted the much ballyhooed "dialogic" reading style (Whitehurst, Arnold, Epstein, Angell, Smith, & Fischel, 1994). Several of the parents complained that this form of reading would not work because their children preferred that the book be read in an uninterrupted manner. Another explained that as a working, single parent with four young children, reading a book each night was simply not an option in her family. Thus, perhaps because of the environment we had created, parents asked important questions and raised critical issues.

Although PALS is informed by literacy as social practice (e.g., Barton et al., 2000) and socio-cultural theory (e.g., Heath, 1983) in that we value, promote, and build on the literacy activities in which families already engage in at home, it clearly focuses on school literacy. One of the major criticisms of family literacy programs is that they privilege school literacy. Like Delpit (1995), we believe that many parents, and especially those on the margins of society, see school literacy as a way of

empowering their children to participate more fully and equally in society. And like Edwards (2003), we believe it is important to ask parents and other caregivers in family literacy if the programs are meeting their needs. We found support from the parents with whom we worked for our focus on school literacy, questioning previous assertions in this area (e.g., Tett & Crowther, 1998)

Finally, this study suggested that those of us who work in family literacy might assume a more nuanced stance when we consider family literacy programs and how they affect the lives of families and the well being of communities. Although issues and problems previously identified in the literature arose in our work, they were not of the magnitude that is sometimes inferred from that body of work.

CONCLUSION

The parents with whom we worked valued the learning that occurred in PALS. They saw it as a non-threatening entry into the schools, especially because many of them had less than pleasant memories of their own schooling. They also believed that their understanding of their children's learning and how to support it was greatly enhanced. Moreover, they saw the program as building relationships within the school and in the larger community. The evidence from this study suggested that through PALS, we created an intersubjective space where parents, teachers, and children learned from each other in respectful and supportive ways. Nevertheless, a number of issues arose that need continued attention. As we continue to work in new contexts, we assume other issues will arise but we take that to be a part of working with families and communities in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

NOTES

¹ PALS was piloted in four schools in two school districts in 1999-2000. The program is operating in 15 school districts in British Columbia, in the North West Territories and in Ontario at the time of writing this article. An in-depth description of PALS is available at <http://www.lerc.educ.ubc.ca/fac/anderson/pals/>.

² Some readers might question our decision to ask parents who were participating in a family literacy program to do a written evaluation of the program. However, as we worked with parents and listened to them, we were

convinced that nearly all of them wrote fairly extensively on a regular basis. For example, when we did a session on technology and learning that one group requested, we discovered that many of the parents used e-mail frequently. Others kept a diary or journal while still others wrote letters to the editor of the local newspaper or kept minutes for the school Parent Advisory Committee. As previous researchers (e.g., Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Bloome, 2005) have shown, contrary to what is often believed to be the case with low-SES or working class communities, reading and writing are very much a part of the daily, lived experiences of many families. As Bloome (2005) pointed out, such writing is often rendered invisible by institutions of power (e.g., schools, government bureaucracies); in the case of the participants in PALS, they seemed unaware of how much reading and writing they engaged in daily until we encouraged them to reflect upon it. We acknowledge, of course, that the forms and functions of these literacy practices (e.g., reading supermarket flyers or the TV Guide, writing grocery lists, reading and writing emails to family and friends, reading the Koran) might often differ from the essayist forms of literacy (Olson, 1994) privileged in schools. The point is that most of these parents were very capable of writing and we did not see asking them to write as a limitation of the study.

³Although we did not interview the teachers in the schools for this study, we did so in an earlier study in a neighbouring school district where PALS was implemented (Anderson, Smythe, & Shapiro, 2005). Teachers reported that working closely with parents over an extended time period led to increased rapport with, respect for, and understanding of the families. That is, reciprocity in shared understanding occurred as these two groups worked collaboratively. If as Epstein (2002) has argued, children's learning is enhanced when families are involved in schools, the synergistic understanding and relationships that appear to have developed were especially important.

⁴Many of the parents with whom we have worked assumed leadership roles both within the schools on Parent Advisory Committees and within the larger community by becoming members of literacy advocacy groups, running for elected office, and sharing their experiences at community, professional and educational conferences (e.g., Cody, 2005). Furthermore, some parents, having had a positive experience with PALS, began advocating for similar programs as their children progressed through the grades. Consequently, some schools in the district are offering programs modelled on PALS for parents of older primary and elementary students. Through their participation in PALS and the growing awareness of classroom needs, parents have also demonstrated a willingness to engage critically on their own behalf with policy makers. As we reported elsewhere (Anderson et al., 2005), parents collaboratively wrote and circulated a

petition that they sent to the provincial government, calling for the reinstatement of classroom assistants who worked with special needs students and who had been laid off as a result of cutbacks in government funding to education.

⁵ Interestingly, the teachers involved in a parallel study in a school in an adjacent school district with a large number of families new to the country also saw the enhanced communication that occurred as teachers and families got to know and trust each other (Anderson, et al., 2005).

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