

**Family Literacy:
Reading, Writing, and Survival**

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If we believe that the family is the primary institution that endows meaning and value to human life, we must support the family and help parents to raise and educate their children.

Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines (1988)

ABSTRACT

Student recollections of childhood realities in regard to literacy acquisition in the home were examined in this study through discussion, interviews, and journals with 11 participants. The importance placed on literacy activities by significant adults in the home is discussed in this paper as are the concepts of family dynamics and relationships and their effect on literacy learning. Effects of abuse, alcoholism, and prejudice according to race, ability, and status are also presented. It is eye-opening for educators to see the emphasis that was placed on survival in their youth, in a very real sense, by many of the participants, even when questioned specifically about literacy experiences.

All names have been changed to ensure anonymity. Those participants who have had life experiences related in one or more vignettes, will receive another name change during the analysis and discussion of childhood realities. This study has been approved by the Human Subjects Committee and permission has been obtained from all participants.

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INTRODUCTION

This project was initiated in response to a growing desire to implement a family literacy project in a small town in Alberta, Canada. Initially, I intended to propose a family literacy project design by gathering adult literacy students' views about necessary components of such a project. Memories of students' school and out of school literacy experiences were also to be analyzed and discussed.

Due to an unanticipated response regarding out of school childhood memories, by a majority of the respondents to the questions I asked about prior literacy experiences, I was compelled to change the focus of the study for the purpose of the final write-up. Although I collected a great deal of data about the types of services the respondents would like to see incorporated into such a family literacy project, and many of the respondent's prior school experiences, I feel that it is necessary to limit the scope of this particular project to discussing the 'out of school' childhood realities of the participants as they were reported to me.

There are four main reasons for this change in focus: a) There was entirely too much information gathered during the research to be able to deal with it in its entirety and within the confines of a one-course project. b) As one of three primary people involved in setting up the proposed family literacy project, I am aware of the respondents' desires and concerns in relation to the project and will be able to respond to them as the project is implemented, even though they are not formally presented in this research. c) The respondents were very open and honest in their responses to me about their childhood realities in regards to literacy learning and shared with me some very powerful stories that demand attention. I feel that many of these stories were related to me in an effort by the participants to be heard and at least partially understood. It is important to me to share these stories in order that greater understanding may occur; it is only through awareness

that we begin to see, understand, and perhaps, change. d) Although many childhood realities were reported that dealt with school rather than home, I feel that it is necessary to remain focused on the participant's childhood realities of home for the purposes of this project. The family literacy movement believes that the home is a child's primary learning environment and parents are a child's first and most influential teachers. Literacy activities that begin in the home, and that are supported by parents, are critical to a child's literacy development (F.L.A.G., Project Proposal, 1995). If we, as educators, are to begin to battle the problems of illiteracy, we must attempt to understand the family dynamics that produce literacy experiences for some of the people with whom we work.

Therefore, the question that my research has endeavoured to answer is:

What have been the 'out of school' childhood realities in relation to family literacy experiences of a sample of adult literacy and upgrading students in a rural Alberta community?

This research includes an analysis and discussion of childhood memories which are perceived by the students as having an influence on their own literacy learning. Research data and information obtained from the literature has been used to support the findings.

Following is a description of incidents that recently affected one of my young adult literacy students and her son. Sandy, the student described through the following vignette, has expressed a desire to become involved in a family literacy program for the sake of her three children who range in age from four to ten. She has also agreed to act as a participant in my study.

A Week in the Life of an Adult Literacy Mom: A Background Vignette

Monday

Sandy is visibly distracted today. She received yet another call from her son's elementary school this morning. Apparently, Dale has received another suspension, six days this time. The school principal and staff are becoming increasingly concerned that they won't be able to deal with his behaviour within the school setting if it does not drastically improve. Sandy's community liaison worker, who has a primary responsibility to provide a link between home, school, and the community, has informed me that unless Dale begins to take responsibility for his actions and control of his behaviour he might be moved to a larger centre for a three-month period in order to complete in-depth psychological and behavioural assessments. A School Board meeting has been set for next week in order for members of the Board to discuss the situation with Sandy and the school staff. Sandy is frustrated because she has been told that she will be expected to make a presentation of appeal to the Board in order to convince them to allow Dale to remain within the local system. Her primary concern is that Dale must attend the local school if he is to live at home.

Tuesday

Sandy drops by with Dale after class so that she can inform me of the reason for her absence this afternoon. Dale greets me in a friendly manner and then chooses to remain outside while his mother discusses the current situation with me. Apparently she has spent the entire afternoon in conference with her social worker, the community liaison worker, and her son's assigned counsellor. She informs me that all parties are concerned about the situation at the school and are working together to keep Dale in the community and at home. Sandy explains to me that Dale's counsellor is especially concerned about having to

remove Dale from his home environment as it appears to him that Dale's home is one of the few positive aspects of his life; furthermore, because Dale has only in the past few months been returned to his mother's care by his father, another move may be detrimental for him.

Dale's mother confides to me that she is at her wit's end. She knows that Dale is disruptive at school and yet she can't understand why his behaviour resembles that of Jekyll and Hyde. She protests by saying, "He's such a good kid at home." Sandy relates a recent incident in which she was called to the school because Dale was causing a disturbance. As she entered the school she said that she was shocked to see her son running down the school hallways, shouting and kicking lockers along the way. Apparently, Dale had not been expecting to see his mother at the school because she said that he stopped immediately upon seeing her and said, "Oh, hi Mom. How's your day?"

According to Sandy, Dale appears to be doing well enough academically, although he has missed a great deal of the course material while he has been out of the class for inappropriate behaviour. Apparently, the teachers explain that Dale is capable of completing his assignments when he chooses to do so and that although he may fail this grade, he has the potential to do well. Concern has been expressed, though, that Dale will not continue to do well academically unless he changes his behaviour.

Friday

Sandy's empty chair in the classroom is a constant reminder of the problems that she is currently experiencing. She was absent yesterday as well, although we have not been made aware of any reasons for her absence.

Stan, the community liaison worker has come by to enquire about Sandy's absences. Stan is concerned that the Learning Centre's policy regarding ten days accumulated absence may jeopardize her future in our program. We too are concerned about the classes Sandy has had to miss, especially because she has also incurred other health-related absences. However, we assure him that absences required for school meetings and illness will be excused.

This vignette illustrates the perpetuation of family literacy cycles and the complexity of issues surrounding the acquisition of literacy, a phenomenon much bigger than reading, writing, and numeracy.

I realize, as I continue to work with literacy and adult education students such as Sandy and come to know many of their families, that family literacy initiatives are integral to the field of adult literacy. Dale and Sandy are caught in something much bigger than they are able to battle by themselves. The societal web that has been woven appears to have few routes of escape. One must wonder if Dale's lack of literacy skills marginalized his participation in the classroom and so contributed to his behaviour, or if his behaviour has been responsible for decreased literacy skills. How much has the fact that Dale was just recently returned to live with his mother affected his behaviour? What sorts of attitudes about the importance of literacy and school have been promoted within the home? What is the relationship between Dale's literacy level and those of his parents? What types of parenting behaviours are demonstrated by the significant adults in his life? Are there cultural or relationship factors affecting the situation? There are no easy answers for these questions, but the family is where we need to start addressing them (F.L.A.G., Position Paper, 1995, p 1).

Dale is only one child and there are as many individual situations as there are children , but one thing is clear - literacy begins long before children enrol in the formal school system and literacy is affected by much more than what occurs within the four walls of any classroom (Taylor, 1993). If we are going to hope to address the literacy problem in a real way, we must begin at the beginning, with the parents and children of 'at-risk' families (M.C.L.,1994).

My Professional Background

Although I began my career as an elementary school teacher and taught in the primary grades for three years, I have worked primarily in the area of adult literacy and adult education since September of 1988. For the past six years, I have been employed on both a full time and part time basis with two Alberta Community Colleges. I have taught a variety of adult education classes ranging from introductory literacy classes to high school upgrading and entry-level college courses. I have worked with both small and large groups of students in both on-campus and satellite campus facilities.

On the provincial level, I act as a committee member for Family Literacy Action Group (F.L.A.G.), an organization devoted to advocacy and support of family literacy initiatives throughout the province. As a director of a local literacy society, I am very involved in literacy initiatives, including the implementation of a local family literacy project. I maintain membership with the Alberta Association of Adult Literacy, The International Reading Association, and The Movement for Canadian Literacy in order to receive current publications.

My Interest in the Topic

Because of my combined interest in primary and adult education I have wondered about the relationship between some of the children who so painfully struggle through primary

school and adults who struggle, just as painfully, through Adult Basic Education or upgrading classes. I was quoted by Martin (1992), in an informal interview in 1990, as saying "I think teaching ABE is really important to me because it's the same kids from Grade 2 (kids...who were struggling so hard to find their way) who are now walking through the door of my ABE classroom as adults. Some of the kids got their lives straightened out, but for some, the problems they had as children just followed along with them as they grew up" (p 102).

It has often frustrated me that even through seemingly effective remediation programs, we have often been unable to affect student progress. Reactively, through Adult Basic Education and upgrading programs, we attempt to remediate problems that obviously began for students many years before. This project has given me some insight into what may be influencing some of these individual processes. Perhaps some students have been unable to deal with literacy learning because of outside factors that loomed much larger. I have found that some adult students, such as Sandy, still face problems which appear to overwhelm their ability to progress and affect the progress of their children.

A great deal of my time has been spent in Adult Basic Education classrooms teaching language arts to small groups of ten and fewer individuals. I have often been able to work quite closely with each of my students, sometimes even on an individual basis. Because of this close interaction, I often come to know my students quite well and develop strong, trusting relationships.

Interaction with other literacy instructors and tutors in the field leads me to believe that my situation is not unique; many literacy practitioners develop similar relationships with their students. As students find it necessary to deal with issues in their lives, they often choose to confide in those people with whom they have been able to develop close

relationships and those who are perceived to be able to help them. Literacy practitioners often fit into both of these categories. Horsman (1990), in her work with literacy programs, found that "for many women, social aspects of the program seemed to be crucial" (p 225). She attributed this necessity for social interaction, within the programs she studied, to feelings of isolation on the parts of many of the women she interviewed. "Many of the women had been isolated in childhood, had not made friends in school and now did not trust neighbours" (p 217).

The project satisfies my needs to continue to research and study in the area of adult literacy, but is also of practical interest and benefit to the people in the community in which I currently reside. The local literacy society has identified the initiation of a family literacy program as one of its primary objectives. Funding, for the books and materials necessary to begin this project, has been secured through an Alberta-based oil and gas company, and the local Adult Learning Council has agreed to provide instructional support for the project. The initiation of a family literacy project based on the Homespun model (Skage, 1995), a family literacy program which provides "parents with instruction on how to read with their children and how to provide a supportive literacy environment in the home" (p 25) is currently scheduled to begin in 1995. *A more detailed description of the Homespun program can be found on page 11 of this document.*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Characteristics of Children 'At Risk'

Although "literacy skill development is a complex process with a large number of factors (encompassing early childhood reading patterns, home and work environments, leisure time activities, and level of education) interacting in complicated patterns to shape an individual's literacy proficiency" (Statistics Canada, 1991, p.23), it may be determined

that children who are at-risk of becoming illiterate adults are likely to come from families with one or more of the following characteristics:

- parents are not literate
- parents do not choose to read or write (literacy activities are not modelled)
- parents have not completed high school or continued their education
- parents do not value reading and writing
- parents do not value education
- few books in the home
- little other reading material in the home
- little or no shared story reading

In addition to these literacy-linked characteristics, there are other contributing social factors, such as poverty, inadequate nutrition, abuse, addiction to drugs or alcohol, and mental illness, which may contribute to families being named 'at-risk' by social agencies referring clients. "For most persons who lack literacy skills, illiteracy is simply one factor interacting with many others - class, race and sex discrimination, welfare dependency, unemployment, poor housing and a general sense of powerlessness" (Harman and Hunter, 1979, p 9).

Recognition of the Importance of Family Literacy

In the wake of the International Year of the Family, family literacy is gaining ever greater recognition. Those of us working in the field of literacy are understanding that it is only through working with all members of the family, including the children of 'at-risk' families, that the cycle of illiteracy can be broken. The Movement for Canadian Literacy in their "Brief to the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development" (March, 1994) argued that, "a national vision is required which entails a complete integrated system that provides support to learners at every stage of their development...[in order] to create a

"learning culture" to replace the cycle of illiteracy we are currently experiencing." They continued to emphasize that, "Prevention means dealing with literacy from the beginning, from the moment a child is born." (M.C.L., 1994). The goal of family literacy projects is to enable families to take on this challenge by providing them with necessary tools and support .

Family Literacy Projects vs. Traditional Literacy Projects

Family literacy projects are designed to meet a greater number of literacy needs than traditional adult literacy projects for which the focus is primarily the remediation of adults. Not only are family literacy projects able to assist adults requiring literacy upgrading to access the services they require, but they are able to provide early forms of intervention for the children who are 'at-risk' of becoming illiterate adults. Parents are encouraged to become positive role models and facilitators in their children's literacy development which has important implications for family relationships (Skage, 1995, p 11). Parents are often more willing to access literacy services for the sake of their children than they are for themselves. Horsman (1990) found that "many of the women [in her study] have transferred their hopes for a better life to their children....women who experienced hard childhoods want their children to have a different sort of childhood from the one they experienced" (p 109).

Family Literacy Models

Family literacy programming can take many different forms depending on the needs and resources of the communities initiating the programs. Although there are other methods of classification for family literacy programs, many Canadian and Alberta-based programs identify themselves according to Nickse's typology of four basic models: Direct Adults - Direct Children, Indirect Adults - Indirect Children, Direct Adults - Indirect Children, Indirect Adults - Direct Children (Skage, 1995). Programs are classified according to

the type of participant (adult and/or child) and the degree of intervention (direct or indirect). The degree of intervention is determined according to "whether or not the adult and the child are present for literacy development any or all of the time" (Nickse, 1989, p 29). "Primary" participants receive direct services while "secondary" participants benefit indirectly.

Following is a description of some of the more prevalent family literacy models currently in operation in Alberta communities. Many communities have adapted these models to meet their distinct needs. Our local community has either in operation, or in various stages of implementation, three of these models: Homespun, Books For Babies, and PAT. For additional information about these models or a more complete listing of family literacy models, see (Skage, 1995).

Homespun

Homespun, a Direct Adults - Indirect Children model, is the most well-known family literacy model in the province. It brings parents of preschool age children together once a week for an eight to ten week period to learn ways of sharing reading experiences with their children. Parents take home a different children's or trade book each week during the session and share it with their children, incorporating ideas into their sharing that they have learned at the session. Then, they return to the weekly session to discuss the experiences they had with their children while reading the stories. Subsequently they will be introduced to more ideas and the new story for the week. Throughout these sessions, it is hoped that parents will come to realize how important they are as teachers and role models in their children's lives and what a wonderful shared experience reading can be for them and their children. There is usually also an adult literacy component to the Homespun program in that parents are asked to discuss adult readings, write for children, and respond to literacy experiences through journals.

Books for Babies

Books for Babies, a Direct Adults - Indirect Children model, presents new mothers with a book bag at the hospital, containing books for the new babies, literature on the importance of reading with young children, and a local library card. Follow-up involves contacting parents informally to discuss the use of the materials. A workshop for new mothers is sometimes held, approximately once each year.

Parents as Tutors (PAT)

Parents as Tutors (PAT), a locally developed Direct Adults - Direct Children program, matches literacy students with children who are considered to be 'at-risk' by the local elementary school. The practitioner, a former literacy student, negotiates a contract with the family. Subsequently, she conducts paired reading with the child, in the child's home, five days a week for eight weeks. During the eight week program, the practitioner trains the parent to work with the child, using the paired reading technique. As a literacy student, the practitioner is not seen as a threat to the family. All participants, including the practitioner, the children, and the parents benefit from this very successful program.

Partnership Approach to Literacy (P.A.L.)

Partnership Approach to Literacy (P.A.L.), a Direct Adults - Direct Children model, offers individual tutor support to school-age students who do not enjoy reading, do not choose to read, and who are in the bottom third of their class. Students are taught to read through their strengths and preferences. "Reading for Enjoyment" workshops are held in order to present parents with strategies to enable them to help their children.

Rhyming Babies

Rhyming Babies, a Direct Adults - Direct Children model, encourages parents of babies and toddlers to interact with their children through age-appropriate literacy activities such

as rhymes, poems, games, and songs. This model encourages library use and the social interaction of both parents and children. Objectives include increased language development, and fine and gross motor skill development . Relationships between parents and children are fostered.

Research demonstrates that children growing up in literate environments are more likely than peers who do not grow up in literate environments to become literate adults. Therefore, it must become the goal of educators and the greater society to ensure that as many children as possible are given the opportunity to grow up in literate environments. Family literacy programs are gaining recognition as a plausible method of tackling the problem of intergenerational illiteracy by helping families to gain the skills they need to produce literate environments within their own households. Through variety, family literacy projects allow communities to create programs which are seen by facilitators to be most useful to the specific groups of people involved. The fact, though, remains that family literacy begins in the home. As outsiders to these home environments, it is necessary to gain some understanding of the lives of the individuals and families perceived as clients. This study enables us a glimpse into the home lives of the eleven participants involved in the study and allows us to gain some understanding of the challenges with which family literacy facilitators are faced.

METHODOLOGY

The Community

This study was conducted in a small town in Alberta with less than 1400 residents, part of a larger farming community with a service area of approximately 6000 residents. An informal needs assessment was conducted in 1994 by local agencies involved in community support, including Family and Community Support Services (F.C.S.S.) and

staff from the local elementary school. They found that there are approximately 70 families in the area on Social Assistance, 40 or 50 of which have children. They also identified a large population of working poor. These agencies have estimated that 19% of the children in the community are 'at-risk'. Statistics Canada reported in their 1991 Census results that there were 660 persons living in low income family units which represents 21.7 % of the population (Cat. No. 95-373, p.95). Reasons attributing to such a high proportion of at-risk families have been identified by the needs assessment as problems associated with an abundance of low-cost housing, an inability on the part of the clients to access services, and inadequacies in the parenting and/or life skills of the parents. Many of the individuals within the identified 'at-risk' families are unemployed and do not have reliable transportation.

Subjects

All 11 of the participants, six female and five male, were students of the local Learning Centre, where I am currently employed and have been employed as an instructor since the initiation of this study. At the time of the study, the Learning Centre, an ABE and upgrading facility, had an enrollment of 14 students, seven male and seven female. Nine of these students had elementary or preschool age children, and two were expecting a first child. Another student was expecting to have his elementary school-aged grandson return to live with him.

The Learning Centre was initiated as a joint venture by the local Community College and Alberta Social Services in an effort to enable Social Service recipients to gain credentials necessary to access employment opportunities. At the time of this study, all of the participants were receiving Alberta Student Finance Board funding which enabled them to attend the Learning Centre.

These students, through admission to the program, have identified themselves as requiring upgrading or literacy skills, so they are most able and qualified to relate their own backgrounds and describe what their 'out of school' childhood realities have been in relation to their family literacy experiences.

Familiarization With Concepts

The students had not had any previous experience with family literacy programs, so it was necessary to introduce them to the entire notion of family literacy. An outline of some of the existing programs and possibilities for programming was presented, as was general information about the methods and goals of the family literacy movement. A sample lesson of the Homespun program was provided by an instructor at the Learning Centre who has received instruction in the Homespun training. A former literacy student and the coordinator of the local Family Literacy PAT project, also made a presentation to the students about the family literacy program in which she has been involved.

Data Collection

Students who agreed to participate in the study were asked to respond through journals, group discussions, and personal interviews to questions about their experiences with literacy and education, and their perceptions about the intents and requirements of family literacy programming (see appendices 1 and 2).

The response method was often chosen by the participants and was dependent upon the type of question asked and the comfort level of the students. For instance, some students chose to broach subjects which they found to be difficult through journals rather than through group discussions or personal interviews. I participated in the study by completing the activities with the students and sharing my responses with them.

I have collected data in the following form:

a) Journal Entries

Journal entries from seven of the 14 students in the centre were collected. Although I encouraged the students to write, the onus was strictly on voluntary participation. Five of the respondents were women although there were equal numbers of men and women in the class. Three women and one man contributed multiple entries.

b) Personal Interviews

Ten personal interviews were conducted, five with male and five with female members of the centre. Six of the students I interviewed had previously contributed journal writings. Students were chosen on a random basis depending on availability. I was not denied any interviews. In fact, the students were very willing to be interviewed, making special arrangements when necessary. Interviews were conducted either in my home or in the homes of my students, at the choice of the participants. Six interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants and four were conducted in my home.

Personal interviews with the respondents were conducted in the form of a conversation in order to maintain an open, informal atmosphere. Spradley (1979) recommends thinking about "ethnographic interviews as a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants"(p 58). Through discussion the researcher is better able to discover what things mean to the informant to better represent the informant's views (p 92). He also recognises the importance of maintaining informant cooperation and explains that "a few minutes of easygoing talk interspersed here and there throughout the interview will pay enormous dividends in rapport" (p 59).

Although I maintained an agenda and a basic list of questions when I interviewed the participants, I allowed the interview to move in directions that suited the agendas of both myself and the participants. Taylor (1983), in reference to interviews with the families she studied, notes the difficulty associated with maintaining a strict adherence to preformulated sets of questions in that,

participants often have their own sets of agendas and move easily between past and present in order to weave together events which would have seemed disconnected had the question-answer format been strictly observed. The more formal discussions quickly gave way to conversations, and questions related to literacy were dispersed into the more general exchange of ideas (p 111).

All students informed me that they were comfortable with the idea of having their conversations recorded, so I taped interviews and took informal notes.

c) anecdotal notes

I have collected information throughout the study mostly in the form of anecdotal notes to myself after a conversation or discussion with a student or group of students. I have also collected pieces of writing from student assignments and response journals.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from notes, journals, and tapes was documented. In order to make the project more manageable, it was decided to limit the scope of this project; therefore, I have not presented or analyzed all of the data that I received from the respondents.

Participant's 'out of school' experiences are discussed and analyzed in an attempt to, at least partially, illustrate the childhood lived realities of the students. This particular focus was chosen because it was felt that certain students had entrusted me with very powerful stories which could possibly promote greater societal awareness and understanding of

what family literacy can mean to individuals. Hopefully, this increase in awareness and understanding may eventually lead to change.

Analysis of the data does not occur simply after data collection, but is a part of the process throughout the research (Spradley, 1979, p 92). Miles and Huberman (1984) discuss data reduction, "the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the 'raw' data that appear in written-up fieldnotes,"(p 21) as an important component of analysis before, during, and after the collection of data and contend that data reduction, in response to an overwhelming amount of data, continues until the final report is printed.

Although I have attempted to be as objective as possible in gathering and analyzing the data during research, it is important to recognize that complete objectivity for any researcher is impossible. Spradley and McCurdy (1972) note that "the events of social life are infinitely complex" and that because the investigator is a human being, it is impossible to record all aspects of any social interaction (p 13). They continue to say that "In any research, selective observation and selective interpretation always work to transform the 'actual events' into the 'facts' that are used in a descriptive account" (p13). It is up to the investigator to determine whether or not to be conscious of his or her own selective processes or allow them to go on without his or her awareness (Spradley and McCurdy, 1997, pp 13-14). Due to ethnocentrism and necessary reaction to circumstance based on prior life events, both important human characteristics, "Selection [is] influenced by the investigator's personal experience and cultural background" (p 16).

During the interviews, I realized that many of the responses I was receiving were not what I had anticipated. I became very conscious of these afore stated selection processes.

During data collection and analysis I attempted to combat them in several ways: a) All of the interviews with the respondents were taped and I made very few notes during the

actual interviews. Once I was able to be alone, I transcribed the tapes, in most cases, verbatim. That way, I was less likely to be influenced by the overall message of the interaction than by the actual words of the respondents. b) I made a conscious effort to ask only the type of questions that dealt directly with literacy activities in the home (see appendices 1 and 2) regardless of the types of responses being offered by the participant's. In this manner, I avoided asking leading questions. c) Subsequently, I used direct quotes to represent the participants' responses whenever possible during the final write-up of the project in order to minimize my affect on their words. d) Students were given a choice of response methods in order to allow them more control over the type and manner of response they found desirable. Several students chose, at different times during the process, to respond through journals; thus, they had opportunity to carefully choose and select their own words. I used the precise words they had chosen in direct quotes during the discussion of results. e) During the interpretation of data, I grouped similar comments according to emerging themes, but I always tried to allow for variance within the theme itself. Unless individual students simply did not make comments that would fit into a particular theme, their comments were included. I attempted to include all views whether or not they supported those of the majority. f) I represented the students' views numerically for each theme by identifying the number of participants and responses. I then incorporated the numbers into charts in order to represent the views of the participants more clearly to the reader.

There are several reasons for which I have chosen to represent each of the respondent's views with direct quotes whenever possible and have attempted to present as much context for the comments and the writing as I am able. It is necessary:

a) In order to lend authenticity to the writing and provide the students with the voice they deserve. Despite its importance, Horsman notes that "few educators seek to

describe the situation of those who are labelled illiterate from the 'illiterate's' perspective" (1990, p.136).

b) In order to deal with the problem of objectivity. Spradley and McCurdy (1972) suggest that a researcher "seek to describe a culture using those criteria that his informants employ as they observe, interpret, and describe their own experiences during the course of life....Whenever possible, the investigator is guided by his informant's knowledge, by their perceptions and understandings of experience." (p18)

c) In an attempt to validate my qualitative analysis. Miles and Huberman(1984) are convinced that better data displays such as matrices, graphs, networks, and charts are a necessity (p 21). Verbatim text also aids in this process. I have included charts, when appropriate, within the context of my writing in order to assist the reader in a better understanding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Part 1: Family Literacy Means Survival

While interpreting the data, I grouped similar comments as they emerged and discussed each theme in terms of the information the respondents related to me about their personal family literacy experiences.

The researcher's choices of which data choices to code, which to pull out, which patterns summarize a number of chunks, what the evolving story is, all are analytic choices...which sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data in such a way that 'final' conclusions can be drawn and verified (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p 21).

Following is a discussion of results that have been extracted thematically from the data.

The power of the students' voices best illustrates that factors other than literacy dominated

their lives and influenced their literacy learning. I felt that it was important to include such data in this discussion even though it did not relate directly to the questions I asked about literacy learning because of its importance to the students involved and its importance to a broader definition of literacy which encompasses much more than reading, writing, and numeracy.

It is necessary to remember that the participant's comments, made either in journal writings or during interviews, are perceptions of the participants themselves about situations which may have occurred at any time during their lifetimes. They were responses or recollections that the students had at the particular moment that they were communicated and may or may not change from time to time and situation to situation. This is not to discount the student's stories in any way; I do believe that the students responded thoughtfully and honestly to the best of their abilities. It is simply to state that memories in general may be subject to some alteration over time. Other people who may have also been involved in these same situations have not had an opportunity to communicate in this process. It is possible that their perceptions may have been somewhat different from the perceptions of the participants of this study. Terry referred to this difference in perceptions when she spoke about stepping in for her younger siblings when it was time for punishment because she couldn't stand to see her mother hit them. She explained, "Our perceptions of Mom and Dad are very different [now]when I talk to my siblings." Different viewpoints of the situation as well as factors such as birth order, familial position, age, sex, and prior or subsequent life events may help to colour the recollection of specific incidents.

Terry apologized for not having more to say about school and academic learning when questioned about her early memories of learning to read and write. "I know that you want to hear about school", she exclaimed, "but I just can't remember. I don't remember

teachers, chalkboards, nothing. How I learned to read is beyond me!" She continued to elaborate that she didn't have many childhood memories at all until she was in junior high school, perhaps grade 8. When asked about reading experiences at home she explained, "I don't remember anyone reading to me or having any books. In fact, I don't remember having any personal belongings at all. I don't remember having a favourite doll, a favourite book, any toys. I'm sure I had toys. I don't remember any of them" (June, 1994). Terry's literacy learning, was a mystery to her; the issues that were most primary in her memory were those that dealt with her family and her upbringing, although she also had some difficulty with the recall of those issues.

Dominant Life Issues

Many of the other students also spoke about issues that were more dominant in their lives than literacy learning. As a literacy and upgrading instructor I have come to know that many of my students have had to endure non-supportive and harsh conditions during their young lives, but the prevalence in their minds of the importance of survival issues in relation to education and literacy still overwhelm me as I continue to interact with them.

The thing that most surprised me about the feedback I received from the participants in my study, both in terms of writings in their journals and personal interviews, was the students' lack of emphasis on the traditional components of literacy; the reading, writing, or numeracy. There was little discussion about school, at least in an academic sense. When I asked them to tell me about their early memories of reading and writing, at home or in school, I was told, in many cases, about abuse and alcoholism, and about scrounging to find food to eat and clothes to wear. At times, I was told about a particular incident that occurred at school or about a particular teacher. It appears that, for many of the students, literacy learning as a child was more about learning to survive and getting through their personal 'day to day' struggles than about learning to read and write.

There has been a trend in recent years to view literacy learning in a holistic manner encompassing reading, writing, spelling, listening, viewing, and numeracy (Alberta Education, 1994, p 1); however, as educators and as human beings, we still tend to neatly categorize learning and separate what happens in the classroom from what happens in the outside world. Unfortunately the world that we live in is not neat and perfect; it is incredibly messy. The message that has come across strong and clear from my students, throughout this research, is that the classroom, the home and the larger social environment cannot be separated from one another. What happens in one area of a student's life will affect the other areas of his or her life. We can no longer discuss reading and writing in isolation from all other factors affecting performance. **Stuart**, a participant in the study, summed it up nicely when he said, "Everything goes downhill; whether it's good or bad, the children are affected" (May, 1994).

Literacy And Abuse

More than half of the participants of the study have placed an emphasis that cannot be ignored on issues such as neglect, abuse, and alcoholism over literacy learning when asked to recall childhood literacy experiences. I chose to document this information in the respondents' own words in an effort to encourage a greater awareness of the complexity of the issues surrounding literacy learning. Six of the 11 participants spoke or wrote candidly about incidents of neglect as well as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse when questioned about their personal experiences with literacy learning during childhood. Alberta Family and Social Services (A.F.S.S., 1990) defines child abuse as "anything that endangers the development, security, or survival of a child. A child is anyone under the age of 18" (p 2). Abuse is categorized by A.F.S.S. into four main types: Neglect, physical and emotional; Physical Abuse; Emotional Abuse; and Sexual Abuse. It is suggested that for the six participants in the study who related stories of abuse, basic physiological and/or

safety needs were not met at the time of the related incidents. In turn, they were unable to respond fully to much of the literacy teaching they received, in whatever form that it may have been provided (Maslow, 1987).

Reported Abuse By Participant					
Participant	Neglect	Physical	Emotional	Sexual	Sex
Terry	X	X	X		Female
Shawna	X	X	X	X	Female
Susan	X		X	X	Female
Ron		X			Male
Bob		X			Male
Stuart			X		Male

Table 1

Although I have attempted to categorize the types of abuse that have been described by the participants in Table 1 as neglect, physical, emotional, and sexual, it is important to realize that the incidents of abuse related to me, by the students, have been removed from the context of their lives and may or may not have not occurred separately from one another. Physical and emotional abuse, for instance, can be very closely linked and may occur simultaneously during the same abusive incident. Because the participants were not questioned directly about abuse, but instead volunteered the information, I have only been able to categorize the abuse according to the way each participant chose to describe the incident(s) to me. It is also difficult as a researcher to determine the difference between such closely related recollections as emotional neglect and emotional abuse. The

participants may have categorized certain recollections or incidents differently had they been party to the process.

It is very difficult to compare and contrast the home lives of the five students for whom abuse did not become an issue during our correspondence, with the students for whom it did. Participants who did not relate stories of abuse rarely related specific details of their lives in regard to physiological and/or safety needs. Through details participants related about their introduction to literacy by the significant adults in their lives, however, it is possible to see that, for at least some of the participants, home could be a place of warmth, caring, and security.

Neglect

Physical

Physiological needs for food, water, and warm clothes must be met in order for any of us to be able to function adequately in our lives. Alberta Family and Social Services defines neglect as,

any lack of care which causes serious harm to a child's development or endangers the child in any way. Physical neglect is the failure to meet the child's physical needs. This includes failing to provide adequate nutrition, clothing, shelter, health care, and protection from harm (p 3).

Stories have been related by two of my students that illustrate their personal difficulties in having these very basic needs met during childhood. These stories follow.

Shawna expressed the following thoughts in a journal entry she wrote in response to questions about school and performance:

I had a hard time learning in school because now that I think of it, it was probably because I didn't have any clothes, just one pair of jeans and two shirts. I would

have to wear my brother's shirts. Also I was always hungry. My father never bought anything but alcohol. I remember having to wait until my father passed out. Then I had to get money out of his pockets without waking him because I had to feed my little brothers and if he woke up I would have got a beating, but I didn't care. All I cared about was taking care of my brothers because my mom didn't want us. So school was not high on my list (April, 1994).

It is not difficult to understand that **Shawna** would often have much more on her mind at school than the assigned task at hand. Children who are hungry, thirsty, or cold are able to devote very little of their concentration to other issues, academic or otherwise.

Terry explained, during our interview session, that her mom never cooked, and that she has memories of eating Cracker Jacks for supper, "You just fended for yourself and went through the cupboards and fridge looking for something to eat." She explained, "Mother never had supper on the table at suppertime. I don't remember ever sitting around the table for a meal like a family, except maybe when we went to relatives" (June, 1994).

Although **Terry** didn't speak about going hungry during the interview, she explained to me on another occasion that she is often fearful of running out of food. She told me that she always keeps a cache of food in a secret place in the house that no one knows about so that she and her family will never be without (March, 1994).

Emotional

"Emotional neglect is the failure to meet the emotional needs of a child for affection, a sense of belonging and self-esteem. It can range from passive indifference to outright rejection" (A.F.S.S.,1993, p 1). Three of the students discussed parental behaviours which indicated a neglect of their emotional needs during childhood.

Terry felt strongly that her mother's neglectful treatment of herself and her siblings negatively affected her self-esteem during her youth:

That's exactly how she treated her kids, like she didn't want them. You grow up with no self-esteem and then you go to school with it; it gets even worse. You really carry a heavy load with you...Dad worked; he was really never there. You can't build self-esteem on something you can't see (June, 1994).

She also spoke about the dramatic effect these negative feelings of lack of esteem and trust had on those outside of her immediate family and circumstance:

My family is really dysfunctional....I used to believe that what happened in my family is what happened in everyone's family, so if someone promised you something, you didn't take it seriously. Because of what happened in my family, you didn't trust anyone (June, 1994).

Susan described her childhood as one with little time for play, "We were never allowed to play in the house." As an only girl with 3 brothers she was responsible for all of the chores in the house as they were categorized women's work, but she also had to do the chores the boys were doing because it was important to learn about how to perform them. She recalls being 7 years old and chopping wood for her dad to sell in the wintertime. She discussed her feelings of not belonging, in any real sense, to the family of which she was a part. She explained that nothing was ever discussed with the children. It was felt that, "that's private. You're a kid. You don't need to know anything." She recalled that it was, "their home, not our home. We were only there to do their work. That's how I felt, anyways" (May, 1994).

Abuse

Physical

Safety appeared to be of primary importance for a number of the students in my study. Six of the 11 participants spoke or wrote directly about what they perceived to be very abusive home lives. "Physical abuse is the intentional application of force to any part of a child's body such that injuries are sustained. It may be a single incident or a series or pattern of incidents" (A.F.S.S., 1993, p1). In two instances students spoke about being afraid of going home because they weren't sure what might be happening when they arrived there and how they might be able to deal with the situations they might find.

Physical abuse was raised as a direct concern by four of the participants in the study.

Ron explained that, "Dad was very abusive towards us. It was his way of dealing with us. We got spankings with razor belts- you know, the old-fashioned razor belts, you see them on movies sometimes - we used to get spankings with them." To some, this may appear to be an overstatement of case, as traditional physical methods of corporal punishment are still fresh in many memories. Straus and Gelles in their book which, "brings together the methods and findings of two landmark studies: The National Family Violence Survey conducted in 1975 and the National Family Violence Resurvey of 1985" (p 3) indicate that hitting children with objects such as belts or hairbrushes has traditionally been acceptable as a form of physical punishment in the United States. I would concur that the same has been true for Canada. Even though Alberta's Child Welfare Act contains laws "which describe conditions and behaviours considered serious enough to require the government or its agent to intervene to provide protection and needed services to children" (A.F.S.S., 1993, p 2), A.F.S.S. recognises that,

there is no consensus in Canadian society about what constitutes abusive behaviour or significant negative consequences. What some people consider to be abusive behaviour, others believe to be a necessary part of child rearing. What some

people consider significant negative consequences, others believe to be temporary discomfort that helps build character (1993, p 1).

As **Ron** continued to speak, it became increasingly clear that he was not simply speaking of spankings, but acts which go far beyond the boundaries of the traditional, "In the case of children, the parental behaviours used...to measure abuse, such as kicking, punching, or hitting a child with an object, are acts that go beyond ordinary physical punishment" (Straus & Gelles, p78). **Ron** recalled, "Underneath the stairway in my Mom and Dad's old place in Calgary you'd find approximately 300 conveyor belts that my dad would hit us kids with. And when he was mad and he'd been drinking, he didn't care where he hit you. He was just going to get his message across" (May, 1994).

Bob's experiences were similar to those of **Ron**, "there were some pretty bad years. Seemed every time I turned around, Dad was giving me a beating. Those I'll never forget." Although he didn't speak about being beaten with objects of any type, he spoke of the pressure of anticipating the forthcoming attack, "I used to wonder if I was going to get the shit kicked out of me when Dad gets home" (May, 1994).

As eldest children, **Terry** and **Shawna** also spoke about beatings and about taking punishment in order to protect younger siblings from the abuse of their parents. **Terry** attempted to describe her mother through example. She told me that she was "kind of like the mother in the Stephen King novel, Carrie." She stated, "Mom used to hit us. I didn't like her to hit my siblings, so I would take their place. Mom was abusive" (June, 1994). **Shawna** simply explained that she had to protect her younger brothers in any way she could as that was of utmost importance to her (April, 1994).

Emotional

Emotional or mental abuse was also raised as an issue by three participants in the study.

Emotional abuse consists primarily of verbal attacks on a child's sense of self. Persistent humiliation, rejection or the constant reiteration that a child is bad or stupid undermines the child's self-image, sense of worth and self-confidence. Other behaviours which are emotionally abusive are forced isolation, restraint or purposely instilling fear. Emotional abuse is usually chronic and part of a particular style of child rearing (A.F.S.S., 1993, p 1).

Their stories follow.

Susan spoke about being called names and yelled at, "My father was ... verbally abusing me, calling me 'Bitch' and 'Slut' etc" (April, 1994).

In response to questions about his early recollections of school **Stuart** told me that he had been held back in kindergarten and had felt stupid and had been called "Stupid" by his parents and others during much of his younger life. He then related an incident that had occurred when he was about 5 or 6 years of age, "I pooped under the table one day. I can't remember why I did it. My mother picked it up and rubbed it on my face and showed everyone how I looked. She called me stupid and retarded and said I was the most trouble of any of the kids" (May, 1994). In general he explained, "If I wouldn't get something right away, they [my parents] would get so frustrated" (May, 1994).

Terry related an incident from her childhood in which she and each of her siblings were forced to choose between their Mom and Dad in the midst of a family dispute. She explained,

Everyone picked Dad. As much as I didn't like my mom, because my mom was abusive, I had to pick Mom. I felt bad for her...and I knew that if nobody picked Mom, we'd really get it later.... They all went for ice cream. My mom said, 'I

don't need your pity,' and sent me to my room. Dad didn't bring me anything because I picked Mom (June, 1994).

Sexual

Finally, incidents of sexual abuse were introduced with two of the female respondents.

"Sexual abuse is the improper exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity or behaviour.

It includes any sexual touching, intercourse or exploitation by anyone in whose care the child has been left or who takes advantage of a child" (A.F.S.S., 1990). Both female respondents chose to broach the topic through journal writings and both were in response to discussions about school performance. Their recollections follow.

Susan wrote about her perceptions of why she found it so very difficult to deal with school:

I had lots of family problems at home, with a drunk and a sexually abusive father. I never had a good night's sleep. I was always wondering, was this going to be another night of terror? Then the next morning I had to get up and face another day. I go to school, tired and feeling very useless, incapable of even concentrating....At the age of 14, I ran away from home. I returned and I had no more sexual abuse, which had continued for five years; [it] was now over. My father was still verbally abusive...when I turned 16, I quit school and left home. I always wished I had a better family life. So, I would have finished school and been more confident in myself (April, 1994).

Similarly, **Shawna** spoke of the nights of terror and the inability to sleep, always wondering if tonight would be another. She spoke of home as being anything but a place of refuge; instead it was a place of fear.

I always feared going home because it was scary if Dad was drunk. Who knows what would happen. I've seen so many disgusting things and I have seen people stabbed, shot at, beaten, raped. Whenever my father would bring home his drunken friends, I would not be able to sleep because they would try to molest me so I would have to sleep under my bed or at the park if it was warm enough. So I understand that it wasn't because I was stupid like I thought, but because of my environment that I didn't do well at school (April, 1994).

Discussion of Abuse Issues

The thought that continues to overwhelm my mind deals with the types of response that I got from the participants about abuse, even though I never once questioned the participants directly about their home lives or about whether or not they had ever been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused. I questioned them about literacy learning experiences in their homes and in their schools (see appendix 1) and yet several of the participants told me about, or wrote to me specifically about, issues involving abuse and alcoholism. What was it about my questions or questioning style which allowed them or perhaps even encouraged them to speak openly about these issues? What response would there have been to a survey which dealt directly and specifically with these issues? Would more of the participants been identified as victims of abuse or as having alcoholism as a factor in their lives? Would they have found the questions to be intrusive and so would have they been less open with their responses?

These questions are not easily answered and may never be formally addressed, but I can speculate that factors, such as my relationship with the participants prior to the interviews; my conversational questioning techniques; and the importance of these issues to the participants in understanding their own life struggles, all contributed to the numbers and types of responses I received.

The following titles represent the themes that were most pronounced in the data I received from the respondents. Discussion ensues.

Prevalence

A large proportion of the participants of the study indicated abuse through their responses. Although this may appear to represent a disproportionate number, the figures may not seem to be so astounding when examined in the larger context of our society. Abuse continues to be a concern of major importance, as children who live in abusive homes are abundant. Even though "all persons have a legal responsibility to report to child welfare authorities any suspicions that a child is being abused" (A.F.S.S., 1990, WP511V), many cases still go unreported.

The true prevalence of child abuse in Alberta is unknown because of the private nature of family interactions and the lack of a commonly accepted definition...In the 1991/92 fiscal year, Alberta Family and Social Services child welfare workers confirmed over 5,000 cases of child abuse and neglect (A.F.S.S., 1993, p 2).

A shocking discovery was made by Straus and Gelles (1990) in their 1975 study where the rates of physical abuse were found to be astounding,

Interviews with parents indicate that 36 out of every thousand American children from 3 through 17 years old (ie. almost 4%) experienced an assault that is serious enough to be included in our 'Very Severe Violence index,' (p 114)...which 'indicates types of abuse that are undeniably abusive (p 6)...A rate of 36 per thousand means that of 46 million children of this age group in the United States who were living with both parents in 1975, approximately 1.7 million were 'abused' that year (p. 114).

These figures are particularly unnerving when we realize that many cases of abuse are never reported and some may never be confirmed. Acceptability of abuse is indicated in the Straus and Gelles (1990) study, where parents identified very severe violence within their own two-parent families. Although this study is American and nothing comparable can be found for Canada, the results still have significance in light of the commonalities between Canadian and American cultures and the reported abuse by Alberta Family and Social Services (1993).

It would be comforting to think that incidents of abuse are isolated, but research tells us that this is improbable, "Abuse of children is very rarely a single event. It is usually a condition, a style of child rearing or a pattern of interaction which cumulatively is harmful to the children" (A.F.S.S., 1993, p 3). Straus & Gelles (1990) found that "if one assault occurred, several were likely. In fact, in only 6% of the child abuse cases was there a single incident" (p. 114).

Intergenerational Nature of Abuse

Ron broached discussion about the cyclical nature of abuse during his interview.

Although he told me that he wasn't able to talk to his father for a very long time after he left home, he explained that he had over time, "come to an understanding". He went on to say that his dad only had a grade 6 education and had been beaten and called everything under the sun by his father, "It was hereditary for him to beat on us", he confided, " My grandfather used to beat my dad with a hammer" (May, 1994). Straus & Gelles (1990) indicate that abuse is perpetrated when "unintended but powerful training in the use of violence as a means of teaching and resolving conflicts" (p 260) occurs. Unfortunately, "unless there is some positive intervention in their lives, abused children will likely carry the effects of their abuse into their adult lives. They may suffer mental illness or repeat the

patterns of their parent's abusive behaviour in their own child rearing"

(A.F.S.S., 1993, p 5).

Although **Shawna** may have agreed that 'abuse is hereditary', she was not prepared to accept the futility of it. Instead, she was ready to fight tooth and nail to overcome the cycle of abuse. **Shawna** succinctly expressed her feelings in the following poem, contributed through her journal.

Break the Chain

Links made can be broken
Words that hurt were spoken
Actions taken where discipline was not needed
I've lived a thousand hells
My children will not be part of the chain,
for it is my time for change
They forged the links with our fragile lives
I don't understand why we have to pay the price
It makes me feel nothing but shame
They rolled the dice,
But we have to pay for their wicked game
Whatever I will do,
I will break the chain (March, 1994).

The intergenerational nature of abuse is perhaps most apparent to those caught within it.

Performance of Abused Children

Children experiencing abuse are not having their physiological, emotional and/or safety needs met and are therefore less likely to perform to the best of their ability in other areas of their lives. Abused children, "regardless of the method, suffer from physical and/or psychological damage" (A.F.S.S., 1993). Some of the effects may include:

- their general health may be impaired.
- they may be permanently disabled or suffer learning disabilities.
- they may have a distorted self concept.
- their self-esteem may be low.
- they will likely learn that it is OK to hurt those they love.

- they may be mistrustful.
- if sexually abused, they will likely be confused about their sexuality and sexual expression.
- they may feel stigmatized and think of themselves as victims and therefore powerless (A.F.S.S., 1993, p 5).

A variety of behaviours has been associated with the effects of a child abuse including: "running away, prostitution, aggressiveness, depression, and even suicide and violence towards others" (A.F.S.S., 1993, p 5). Some of these same behaviours have been disclosed by participants of the study.

Family Violence

A study by Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson & Zak (1986) indicated that "symptoms of high distress or maladjustment are more frequently present in children who have been exposed to violence between their fathers and their mothers" (p 75). Children from violent homes are seen to have comparably more behaviour problems than children from nonviolent homes.

Boys who witnessed violence between their parents were reported as displaying a higher degree of both externalizing symptoms and internalising symptoms, as well as a lower level of social competence as defined by their activities, social achievement, and peer relationships...Girls from violent families were described as showing more internalizing symptoms related to depression and anxiety. Also, the girls showed lower levels of social competence than did girls from nonviolent families (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, et al,1986, p 76).

The items that differentiated the girls from the violent families from their control subjects included:

'clings to adults or too dependent'; 'feels that she has to be perfect'; 'feels sullen or complains that no one loves her'; 'is stubborn, sullen, or irritable; 'teases a lot'; 'is unhappy, sad, or depressed'; and 'worrying' (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, et al, 1986, p 75).

During her interview, **Terry** described personal feelings about her experiences with family violence and its affects on her school performance.

I had a lot of problems adjusting because my family had to move to different places all the time. Making friends was a difficult task. I never really had a sense of belonging. This really had an effect on the way I learned in the classroom. I had been so busy worrying about how to make friends and "fit in" that I hardly was able to concentrate on my schoolwork....I was so embarrassed because my parents fought all the time that even if I did make friends, I couldn't bring them home (June, 1994).

Boys from violent homes were differentiated from their control group by items such as the following:

'argues a lot'; 'can't concentrate'; 'can't pay attention for long'; 'can't sit still, is restless, or hyperactive'; 'shows cruelty, bullying, or meanness to others'; 'is compulsive or acts without thinking'; 'likes showing off or clowning'; 'teases a lot'; has temper tantrums or is hot tempered'; and 'is unusually loud' (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, et al, 1986, p 75).

These symptoms are found to be similar in nature to those of children who have been abused by their parents (Wolfe & Mosk, 1983) which illustrates the severity of the effect on children witnessing any violence in the home. Patterns of behaviour such as these are likely to negatively affect literacy learning.

Alcohol Abuse

Alcoholism is generally viewed in our society as a non productive behaviour or disease and is easily recognised as a social problem, "a behavior...found harmful to a significant number of people" (Straus and Gelles, p 18). Alcohol was seen by the students to affect a number of their lives and was identified as a contributing factor in their abuse. Five of the participants identified one or more of their parents as alcoholics. **Terry** had trouble putting her thoughts and feelings about her home life into words, but made it clear that home was not the safe haven for her that it should have been and that alcohol was a definite factor in her life.

I really hated school. It was mostly lonely, but it was better than being at home. Things at home were never all that great. I don't remember much of what happened at home, just that it was very corrupt...My dad was an alcoholic, among other things (June, 1994).

Shawna, who also identified her father as an alcoholic, related the following fear: "I was always scared my dad would show up drunk at school or rev his engine in front of the school" (April, 1994).

Alcohol abuse affects relationships among family members in a negative manner. The fear and anxiety demonstrated by these two respondents would have detracted from their learning experiences.

Explosive Factors

A concept raised by Straus and Gelles refers to explosive combinations of factors contributing to the incidence of abuse.

It is likely that certain combinations of factors are much more potent than either of the factors by themselves. For example, living in a low-income family is associated with child abuse, as is having witnessed violence in one's childhood

home. Let us say (hypothetically) that each of these factors increases the chances of a child being abused by 75%. But the combination of poverty and a parent's prior history of witnessing violence during childhood may increase the probability of committing child abuse by 400% rather than 150%. In short, there are likely to be 'explosive combinations'... among the factors contributing to child abuse (p 245).

This snowball effect of violence in relation to other explosive factors in the home has also been identified by Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, et al (1986). It is important to note, "children in violent families have suffered other stressors apart from witnessing assaultive behaviour. In many circumstances, these children have experienced several crises of parental separations, found their prime caretakers in poor physical and emotional health, and had to cope with a number of financial and social hardships (p 76).

Alcohol abuse may be identified as an explosive factor in this study. Five participants stressed the fact that alcohol intensified their unsettled living conditions in that it directly affected their quality of life. Such things as their family's food, clothing, shelter, and safety were negatively affected. Indirectly, alcohol abuse appeared to have an affect on the way some of the participants were viewed and accepted by their communities. Literacy learning specifically, and education generally, were of very little importance in the home.

Position in Society

Although abuse crosses all lines of socio-economic status, culture, and religion (A.F.S.S., 1990), it has been found that "...families earning less than twenty thousand dollars a year have the highest rates of child abuse." (Straus & Gelles, p. 249) indicating that poverty does act as a significant factor in the perpetuation of abuse. The National Family Violence Surveys also, "reveal that a large proportion of the variance in wife beating and child

abuse is linked to the social characteristics of the family and their position in society" (Straus & Gelles, p 7).

The participants of my study, for the most part, have not indicated the status, position or economic well-being of their families, although comments about not having enough food and clothing could indicate a lower income status for some of them. A number of the participants indicated that both parents were working while they were children, some of them more than one job, which could mean that families were having trouble making ends meet.

At least two of the fathers of the participants were employed in construction which, in Canada, tends to be seasonal. **Susan** has indicated that her father took on entrepreneurial tasks such as chopping and selling chords of wood in the off season. A majority of the participants also indicated that they struggled on a daily basis with fitting in or making friends. Struggles such as these are often related to one's position in society, regardless of whether or not that position is linked to economic status.

One student saw a strong connection between her position in society and her exclusion from the mainstream. In a vivid account of her lived experience of racism **Shawna** wrote,

I woke up, put on my clothes, walked to school. I stopped at the store before school; they watched me with their eagle eyes until I left. I could almost feel their eyes penetrate my jacket. School was the same, lonely, hostile. On the way home for lunch, I was hassled by some kids because they didn't like natives. Same thing everyday. I finish school for the day. I went to my karate class. On my way home, the police questioned me about where I was coming from. The police let me go after checking my duffel bag. It's so frustrating. I am a good person. Why am I guilty because of the colour of my skin? (April, 1994).

As a child, **Susan** considered her family to be very underprivileged,

I came from a very poor family so I didn't fit in to everyone's... to the way they dressed and talked. My dad worked in construction, but he drank the money away, basically, and my mom was the type to sit back and whatever Dad said, went. Everyone seemed to have better than us (May, 1994).

Sheila has very unhappy memories of being an immigrant to Canada and the associated prejudice she experienced. She recalls it being a very difficult transition during her fifth year of school. She talks about subsequently failing Grade 5 and the difficulties she had in dealing with the combined pressures of moving and failing, "I fought every day after school. Kids made fun of the way we [my sister and I] talked. I had a bad attitude. I didn't want to be in Canada" (June, 1994).

Bill related his experience with prejudice. He indicated that he was considered by others to be stupid, "As a young boy, I'd often wanted to have friends. But not too many liked me because I didn't catch on to something fast enough" (May, 1994).

Susan felt that she was ostracised by others because of her outward appearance. She wrote about her perceptions of the effects of this ostracism on her self-esteem and school performance,

In school I was different from anyone else. ... I was a[n] ugly duckling. I was tall and very thin (called toothpick). I had buck teeth and wore glasses with 'pointy' ends. I wore second-hand clothes from other families, none of course that were in style at the time....Other kids at school always called me names. I got teased a lot, about my looks, my clothes, everything about me. I was so quiet and shy. Even in class I felt afraid to speak because I would be laughed at. I felt stupid because I was unable to concentrate on my work. Boys made fun of me a lot. One boy

would say to another, while looking and pointing at me, "How would you like to go out with that skinny beaver?" I cried a lot at night while trying to sleep. I went to school afraid to go, tired, and so unsure of myself. I just thought I couldn't do anything and no one would ever want to go out with me, let alone be seen with me (April, 1994).

Prejudice takes many forms. Whether a child is discriminated against because of race, culture, intellect, or appearance, the effects are equally as damaging to the self-esteem of the individual. Reduced levels of self-esteem negatively affect all aspects of the individual's life including literacy learning and school performance.

Abuse and issues surrounding abuse, such as alcoholism and family violence, have an incredibly negative effect on the lives of individuals and especially on the children growing up in such environments, as has been expressed by participants of this study. Behaviour is influenced and school performance suffers. Unfortunately, homes and children affected by these issues are far more prevalent than most of us would like to acknowledge. Due to the intergenerational nature of abuse, the cycle is perpetuating itself and will continue to perpetuate until something is done to stop it where it begins, in the families affected by the abuse. This is a tall order for agencies involved in children's issues, but one that must be addressed.

Part 2: Value Placed on Education by the Families

Having books in the home, reading in the home, encouraging children to succeed academically, and assisting children in completing homework assignments are all behaviours which are considered to indicate a value of education or literacy by those

demonstrating the behaviour. "Educators and researchers have looked at the environments, values, beliefs, and actions of young children who began to read before going to school....these children's homes have many books, easy access to print, and lots of writing materials...available for creating print" (Ollila & Mayfield, 1992, p 18).

In order to determine what the 'out of school' childhood realities of the participants of the study have been in relation to family literacy experiences, participants were questioned about the kinds of literacy activities they recall from their early years (see appendix 2). Responses have been categorized according to the types of behaviours each remembered experiencing during childhood.

Perception By Participants of Value Placed on Education/Learning in the Home

Participant	Valued	Some Value	Little Value	Not Valued
Jeff	X			
Bill	X			
Lisa	X			
Sheila		X		
Stuart		X		
Bob		X		
Ron			X	
Terry			X	
Susan				X
Margaret				X

Table 2

Shawna is the only participant in the study who does not appear in Table 2. This is due to the fact that she responded to the study only through journals and was never

interviewed. Although none of her journal entries dealt directly with literacy behaviours conducted or modelled in her home, her writings indicated a lifestyle that would not be conducive to literacy learning. It would be my assumption that literacy activities were not valued in her home.

Literacy is Valued

Three of the respondents indicated that positive literacy experiences were an important part of their home lives. All three possessed books and two indicated that they had positive reading models in the home. Two of the respondents recall being read to, although one participant appears to have been "read to" on a more regular basis than the other.

Proudly, **Jeff** told me about all the Dr. Seuss books he still possesses from childhood. When questioned about family members reading to him as a child, he responded, "Mom read to me a little bit, but it didn't seem to sink in until I could read by myself. I used to ask for help to sound out the words" (June, 1994).

Bill recalled his parents reading to him often, "When I was about 7, they were always reading to me. I had a lot of Dr. Seuss books, 'Cat in the Hat' and 'Sesame Street'. He explained that with five kids, his mother spent a lot of time reading to them and recalled that his father read the newspaper nightly (May, 1994).

Lisa described her home as one filled with books and encyclopedias. She explained that her dad had worked hard to make his way through school and had done whatever was necessary, including washing dishes, to obtain what was equivalent to his Grade 13. She remembered him, "emphasizing the importance of education, school, study tips, and study times." Both parents thought she should try as hard as she could to succeed academically.

Although **Lisa** says her parents didn't sit down to read to their children, they expected them to read. She recalled her mom telling her to look things up in the encyclopedia when she had a question, "Look it up; you know what it starts with" (May, 1994).

Literacy Has Some Value

Three of the participants indicated that education and/or literacy experiences were given some value in their homes, even though the experiences may not have always been consistent or positive.

Sheila explained confidently that "education was never a priority" for her family and that there were not any books in her home while she was growing up. When asked about anyone having read to her as a child, she responded, "I don't remember anyone reading with me. I presume they did, but I don't recall too much about that....My mom and dad didn't really have time for that, eh. Well, I'm sure that they could have made time; they just never did." In contrast, homework assigned by the school and appropriate conduct in the school were recalled as being very important to her mother. **Sheila** explained,

If we had homework, boy, we had to do it right now. That was the first thing. We didn't get to go out and play; we had to come home and do our homework, take our school clothes off, and then get into whatever and then go play. We had to do our homework first, that's for sure (June, 1994).

She described her mother as a really smart lady and said that she was willing and able to help her children to complete their homework. With a laugh, she characterized her dad as being a lot like herself. She explained that if he was asked a question about homework, his likely response would be, "Why don't you ask your mom?" **Sheila** talked about not having any time or use for school, "I used to go because my mother told me to." She explained that she did her best to avoid being in trouble at school, or at least being caught,

because she recalled that there would be a price to pay at home, "My sister was always getting suspended and I knew when I went home that it wasn't even worth [her] living there" (June, 1994).

When questioned about the importance his parents placed on education, **Stuart** told me that he didn't really know. He explained, "I guess my mother read to me. My father didn't. He took me to a couple of hockey games...If I would have trouble, they would try and help me." Then he continued to explain the difficulties his parents had in trying to keep up with the daily demands of helping with homework, "There were so many kids and both my parents were working. Mom was always working one or two jobs." He recalled having some books at home and told me that he was a very good reader at school, but remembered that he generally watched television at home while he was growing up. Although he could not remember anyone speaking to him about the importance of education, he feels that his parents wanted him to do well in school (May, 1994).

Although **Bob's** father emphasised schooling and/or learning in the home, he reinforced his message negatively. In an effort to illustrate the importance he placed on school to his children, his father used to try to teach his children at home when they were not performing well at school. **Bob** recalled that the incidents began to occur about the time he began first grade.

One of the biggest reasons why I pretty much shied away from school was that we'd get our report cards and he'd get out the blackboard. It was supposed to replace school, but it didn't really turn out that way. Holy Smokes! You clowned around and you got backhanded in the head. That didn't help any. He'd get really mad, angry big time. ... If your marks weren't up to where he thought they should be, there'd be major lectures about it (May, 1994).

Value of Literacy is Minimal

Two of the participants, **Ron** and **Terry**, felt that the emphasis placed on literacy and/or education was really minimal in their homes and probably had very little effect on their school success. **Ron** did not recall having any emphasis placed on reading or education in his home, although he did remember that his older sister read to him on occasion from library books (May, 1994). **Terry** stated that, "My mother never questioned me about school. I don't think she cared. My dad made me do homework, but I mostly just drew pictures" (June, 1994).

Literacy is Not Valued

Finally, two of the participants felt that education was given absolutely no value by their parents or other significant adults in their lives.

Susan explained firmly that education was not thought to have any importance in her home. She stated simply that, "Chores came before homework. If you had homework, that was too bad." No exceptions were seen to be made. "No, my parents never read to me. My dad couldn't read to me; [he] never went to school. No one ever read ... [there were] no books in the house, maybe one colouring book for Christmas and that was it. My grandparents weren't that type [either]. My step-grandfather told us stories, but no one read to us" (May, 1994).

Margaret was adamant in her declaration that there were no books in her home during her childhood years, "My mom worked and my Grandma looked after us. Nobody ever read to us or anything. We had to learn everything on our own. That's no books, nothing; [we] had to learn it all in school" (May, 1994).

Discussion of the Value of Education

It was perceived by participants of the study that varying degrees of importance were placed on education and literacy by their parents and other significant adults during childhood. Literacy experiences ranged from positive to negative and fell at many places between the two extremes.

At first glance, it would appear that no correlation exists between levels of literacy and prior literacy experiences; however, many other factors come into play in the determination of educational values. a) Because values are so intangible, it is necessary to detect behaviours which indicate values indirectly in order to determine those values people hold in esteem. Values may also be expressed in intangible ways so may not always be demonstrated in recognizable behaviours. b) Perceptions of what constitutes positive literacy experiences may differ greatly from individual to individual. c) Clients are sometimes influenced by what they feel the researcher wants to hear. Because I am the main instructor in the area of English and Language Arts for the Centre, some of the participants may have felt that I wanted to hear primarily about positive literacy experiences. d) As individuals, we possess strengths and weaknesses which in combination comprise our beings. Some individuals in our Centre, as in any other, demonstrate higher abilities in the areas of language and reading skills than others.

It is not really clear how much value was placed on literacy learning in some of the families studied because although education may have been valued verbally, literacy behaviours may not have been practiced. Modelled behaviours tend to be much stronger than words. As in the case of the parent who smokes and subsequently tells his or her children not to smoke, asking a child to do his homework or read a book without modelling reading behaviour, is not likely to ensure transfer of the behaviour or value. Certain school or education based activities may have been valued in the home, while

others may not have been valued. Although **Sheila** was made to do homework on a regular basis, she was very confident in her statement that education was never a priority in her home. The values of her parents, in regard to education, appear to have differed greatly giving **Sheila** mixed messages.

Even though education was deemed important in the homes of some of the participants, education may often have been imposed in a negative way, perhaps even verging on abuse in certain cases. The obvious example is **Bob's** experiences with his father's lessons. Less obvious may be the examples of **Lisa** being told to look things up in the encyclopedia without parental support, and **Sheila's** not wishing to be caught misbehaving for fear of the consequences at home.

Three of the participants appear to have had primarily more positive perceptions of their literacy experiences than the other seven. It is interesting to note that these same three respondents did not indicate violence or abuse in their home lives during any of our interactions. Five of the other seven respondents indicated abuse, of one or more forms, in their relationships with their parents. Perhaps the respondents indicating positive literacy interactions were able to focus on the positive aspects of their upbringing because they were not combating memories of violence and neglect.

Two of the three respondents indicating positive literacy experiences also told me during the study that they attended Van Horn High School in Calgary, a transitional vocational school. Only one of the other seven respondents indicated that he also attended Van Horn. Could it be that some of those participants who indicated positive home literacy experiences encountered learning difficulties during school and so were unable to compete successfully with their peers?

CONCLUSION

These 11 participants have given us a special gift, a look into their pasts, which allows us some insight into the difficulties they experienced during the years they were trying to gain the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy.

One of the biggest issues which arose from the data I obtained was the prevalence of abuse and violence in all its forms and the resultant effect on the performance of the students studied. Straus & Gelles (1990) stated that, "a large part of the explanation of child abuse is in the very nature of American society and its family systems" (p 260). Until this violence issue is resolved within our society, it will continue to be a factor in literacy development.

The role of family literacy programs is to assist 'at-risk' families to develop literacy skills within a family context. They also promote literacy values and attitudes and encourage healthy family relationships. "Family literacy programs can be one component of the growing movement to support and strengthen the family and the broader community" (Skage, 1995, p 11).

Literacy levels, like family violence and abuse, tend to be cyclical and intergenerational (FLAG Position Paper, 1995, p2). Ingrained attitudes and actions are difficult for adults to change. Family literacy projects aim to change attitudes in families through children and for children. There is still opportunity to enlarge the scope of these programs and to ensure that they are designed to target families most in need. These programs must be made available in communities throughout Alberta.

Although it is perceived by some that many social programs and services currently exist, it is argued by the social agencies involved that many times the services available are not

effectively utilized by the people most in need. For instance, a parenting class "How to Deal Effectively with Preschool Children" was offered recently in the community by the local health unit. The parents who registered in the class were overwhelmingly considered, by those offering the class, to be parents who already possessed a great deal of parenting skills and who were endeavouring to improve and hone their skills; those parents who have been identified as possessing few parenting skills were not in attendance. This is a consideration which needs to be addressed by family literacy projects.

In conducting this study, I have attempted to give the students involved the voice they deserve, but it is important to realize that this voice comes from a community of which I am not a part, regardless of the relationships which have developed.

Those of us who prepare studies about disadvantaged people run the risk of perpetuating stereotypes. We tend to simplify complex lives into cases to be analyzed, or problems that need to be solved, or statistics to be studied. This tendency and our inability to interpret with understanding the first-hand information that people give us about their aspirations and their lives, are serious blind spots (Harman and Hunter, 1979, p 55).

I have made every effort to relate the stories of these 11 students in a manner befitting the trust in which they were told to me.

Recommendations

As educators, this study has important implications. We must consider that there may be external factors affecting the performance of students. We need to recognize that there are problems in this world big enough to overshadow the importance of literacy learning for the people experiencing them. Although we cannot be expected to solve these problems, it is important to learn to recognise them so that we may become more effective in dealing with them and subsequently in delivering quality education to all students. It is

important for educators to recognize that many undesirable behaviours in the classroom may be the result of abuse in the home and that "punitive discipline methods ... can intensify rather than alleviate the effects of the abuse on these children" (Fact Sheet WP511V). Through gained awareness, educators "can provide opportunities to achieve successes and thereby improve their [the child's] sense of self worth". Although only a percentage of students in any classroom may be suffering from the trauma of abuse or violence in the home, the ripple effects of this problem influence the lives of all who are in contact. As educators, we need to empathize with affected students and assist them in accessing appropriate support. This can be achieved through cooperation at all levels of the education system.

School Boards and Parent Advisory Committees are in a position to assist in this process by ensuring that services such as the following are made available:

1. Community Liaison Professionals (a) who provide community awareness education on building relationships and positive parenting, (b) who support families in and through crises by providing stress and conflict resolution strategies, and (c) who provide in-school education for any students dealing with disruptive or inappropriate behaviour.

2. Professional development for teachers, administrators, and support staff in how to recognize, deal with, and prevent abuse within the student population. Alberta Family and Social Services (1990) states that, "school staff need to know what childhood appearances and behaviours might be indicators of abuse. They also need to know how to respond if a child tells them about being abused". Protocols need to be developed to ensure that appropriate procedures are followed when professionals become aware of abusive situations.

There is an obligation for an even more proactive movement by those who educate our educators. If universal literacy is to become a reality, universities must recognize that

literacy learning encompasses much more than reading, writing and numeracy. They must ensure that all students graduating with a Bachelor of Education degree have received instruction through required curriculum programs in abuse and its effects on literacy education. Universities must encourage more comprehensive research in this area.

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Appendix 1

In order to understand some of the experiences that the students have had with literacy and education, and to better understand some of the factors influencing their responses, I asked them to respond to some of the following types of questions:

How many books were in your home when you were growing up?

What do you remember about people reading to you when you were young?

Did anyone write with you, or talk about numbers (ie. adding or subtracting)?

Did your parents or others in your home read? What did they read?

What do you remember about your first day of school?

How did your parents (significant people in your life) feel about school/ education?

What is the best thing you remember about school?

Describe the worst experience you had in school?

Appendix 2

In order to understand the students' perceptions of what components were necessary to creating a successful family literacy program, questions such as the following were asked:

What sorts of reading and writing activities do you do with your children in your home? How often?

Do your friends read and/or write with their children on a regular basis?

Who needs the program?

How can prospective clients be contacted?

Who should approach the families?

How should they be contacted?

What kind of program would be of most interest to you in terms of time commitment, days, number of meetings, place, format?

Should spouses be included?

What support services such as child care are required?

Are there activities which you would find offensive? What may they be?

Would you participate? Do you know anyone who would participate?

Under what conditions would you come?

Would you want someone to come to your home for a visit to discuss a family literacy project?