

***Story as Community -
Life-wide Literacy***
**to Transform Learning Loss and Isolation
to Community Literacy and Joy**

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Abstract

“Literacy liberates. Literate children become critical and creative thinkers, meaning makers, problem finders and problem solvers. Literate children become change-makers in an increasingly complex world,” (Veldhoen & Crichton, 2017).

Problem Statement

The pandemic laid bare: all homes aren’t equitable learning spaces. Yet, education has long considered the family and home an extension of learning.

Education considers the family and home as an essential learning space. Yet, in most education systems, students’ individual circumstances over which they have no control, such as their parents’ occupations, the language they speak at home or their place of birth, tend to be strong predictors of achievement in school (OECD, 2012). The inequities must be addressed. Arguably, literacy learning is the place to start and it must be situated equitably within society-at-large.

In fact, Ulrike Hanemann (2015) argues for systemic change in the attitudes of societies to support learning as a life-wide process, disrupting the idea that it is merely a classroom-based endeavor, and expanding it to include literacy learning, in particular, as situated in social practice and understood as a continuum of learning. Hanemann advocates the development of ‘literate families,’ ‘literate communities,’ and ‘literate societies.’”

As a liberatory act, communities must consider responsive, resilient practices for literacy equity in families.

Thus, how can we support life-wide and community-wide family reading cultures? How can the practice of community, the very story in our own community, support us?

For the past 15 years, Niteo’s work (www.niteo.org) has almost exclusively focused on global literacy equity, but Covid-19’s impact radically halted our international efforts, while also exacerbating inequities that already existed in our Canadian context. So, we reimagined our mandate to include challenging contexts both locally and globally.

For instance, there are many barriers to achieving SDG4 and literacy in Canada. Pre-pandemic, Canadian Children’s Literacy Foundation’s statistics reported one out of eight students below the age of 15 and a quarter of early readers in Canada were not reading at grade level. For newcomers to Canada, the average literacy gap is equal to 3.5 years of schooling. This is not limited to newly-arrived newcomers, as established immigrants (10+ years in Canada) have a similar gap (OECD, 2017). Now, compounding this reality for newcomers is the impact of Covid - slowed academic progress, isolation, and loneliness.

We have learned much from our global partners and can mirror their community-based literacy work in our Canadian context. When we decolonize our perspectives, we discover inspiration, commitment, and designs for community-wide reading initiatives from our overseas partners.

In Niteo's 2022 pilot project, local newcomer families were nominated by educators or NGOs, paired with university students, undertook an intergenerational exploration of literacy learning in the spirit of play. Literacy access and equity were addressed by utilizing the resources of local, public libraries to inspire the joy of reading. Communal, interest-based activities were built around Niteo's two open education resources: *When We Give Children Books* and *MicroCredential: Leadership in Literacy*. The objective was to cultivate joyously literate communities through a focus on parent-child reading and family-wide literacy habits to promote lifelong learning.

As a pathway to resilience and the delivery of a life-wide learning experience, this paper focuses on the Niteo pilot project: *Story as Community*. We will discuss the literature, the research design, and the implications for practice from *Story as Community - Life-wide Literacy*.

Keywords

Building resilience, intergenerational learning, maternal literacy, resilience, equity

Literature Review

Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (2014) stated,

Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope. It is a tool for daily life in modern society. It is a bulwark against poverty, and a building block of development....Literacy is a platform for democratization, and a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity.

Challenging contexts exist in varying degrees in every community. The term challenging context (Crichton, 2013) is preferred over the more commonly used terms such as developing world, third world, global south, etc. We define challenging contexts as settings in which individuals, due to a variety of circumstances, conditions or environmental constraints, do not have access to some or all of the components associated with a civil society (United Nations, n.d. a) and therefore are prevented or limited from reaching their potential.

A recent World Economic Forum article supports our position when it stated

Picture a country where a fifth of the population lives in poverty. People have to choose between eating or heating their homes and children go to school hungry. Homelessness is rising. And basic services are in crisis, leaving many struggling to cope. This is the damning indictment, delivered by a UN official, not of a developing economy or war-torn nation but of the UK – the world's fifth biggest economy (Edmond, May 2019, 1 & 2).

Children growing up in challenging contexts face additional obstacles in achieving basic literacy. These obstacles include lack of access to materials, isolation, language barriers, living in family contexts in which literacy is situational, attending schools with inadequate basic education, not being able to attend school, and more.

Alarming, seven hundred and fifty million people remain illiterate, with two-thirds being women (United Nations Education, Scientific & Cultural Organization, September 2017), so tackling this reality will require intentional, society-wide effort from governments, education, and NGOs as well.

Despite education being a core and fundamental right as recognised in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, even attendance at compulsory school does not mean a student graduates as literate. Additionally, many children experience disruptions to their education, including but not limited to Covid. Recognizing these challenging contexts, and considering ways to mitigate them is essential in order to support lifelong learning.

Communities must step forward to support vulnerable members of society to embrace and adapt to the economic and social changes in our changing world.

Freire (1972) situates literacy learning within the context of community when he writes, “The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity.” The society and community-based approach must support children’s literacy learning. Furthermore, basic literacy, the decoding of print, is an essential component of what Fadel (2008) and others call 21st century skills – skills essential in an increasingly globalized world.

Ulrike Hanemann (2015) asserts attitudes of entire societies must change to support the ongoing development of literacy in order to address the disparities. He sets out the notion of literacy learning as a life-wide process, disrupting the idea of literacy development merely as a classroom-based endeavour. Ultimately, Hanemann expands literacy development to include literacy situated in social practice and understood as a continuum of learning. Truly, a reading culture.

“Instead of aiming for the ‘eradication of illiteracy’, ensuring the achievement of literacy and numeracy for all, Hanemann entreats us to aim for the development of ‘literate families’, ‘literate communities’ and ‘literate societies’” (p. 7). Therefore, literacy is a process going beyond learning in the classroom. Literacy learning must be situated in social practice and authentic community. This approach argues both for expanding our concepts of literacy and how literacy is developed, along with embracing the notion of lifelong literacy competencies.

Literacy experts from International Literacy suggest, “One of the most powerful strategies for building [literacy] in early childhood is the shared reading experience. In listening to stories, children begin to pay attention to print (e.g., print referencing), which reinforces print conventions and concepts in the context of a meaningful experience” (2018).

Cited in Hanemann, the European Commission of 2012 developed recommendations that include “the most ancient of educational traditions: intergenerational learning” (p. 10). They suggest an approach to learning focusing on intergenerational interactions, including the broader community, to promote the development of literacy and related life skills. It is indeed, life-long and life-wide literacy learning.

Further, Dr. Gordon Neufeld (2014), in his Brussels address, suggests play is crucial in supporting children to unfold their potential, and defines true play as,

An activity only qualifies as true play if it is relatively free of outcome, is differentiated from reality, and is expressive in nature. Play is a parenthesis in real life, having a beginning and an end. It is the place in life where actions and emotions are free of repercussions, especially serious ones. It turns out that play is where growth most happens, including even brain growth (p. 52).

Through our global experience, we know we must broaden our literacy interventions to include intergenerational learning. The Table of Learning (2015), a metaphor for learning communities, advocates for students, educators, and parents to all gather around The Table with learning at the center. This community experience of gathering positions everyone as a learner and encourages equity in positionality at the Table. Niteo actively broadens this Table from school communities to the broader context and place-based learning within the community.

Therefore, it would appear that organizations and policy-makers must work towards the creation of a culture of reading and literacy learning supported by a fertile and dynamic community, in family-wide contexts, steeped in a spirit of play.

Research Design

Program Design: As a foundation, Niteo launches all initiatives based on its organizational design principles. These principles emerged during the pandemic, as a result of reimagining the organizational aims.

Principle 1 – NITEO is invested in fostering a reading culture. This culture is informed by its Literacy Manifesto (see *When You Give a Child a Book*).

Principle 2 – NITEO’s reading culture embraces a broadened sense of literacy. Literacy, by definition, is how we survive and thrive in a changing world.

Principle 3 – NITEO respects the worthiness of every child, family, and community and will hold space for personal and cultural actualization.

Principle 4 – NITEO’s work rests in the development and maintenance of authentic relationships that are reciprocal and responsive, both locally and globally. There is no us / them.

Principle 5 – NITEO values and embraces the UN Sustainable Development Goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>). NITEO uses these goals to inform its activities, and it seeks partnerships with organizations / groups who embrace the goals within their work. Recognizing that the UN SDGs do not directly address indigenous rights or definitions of wellbeing, Niteo will strive to decolonize our work.

Program Goal: The objective was to cultivate a joyously literate community context, focus on parent-child reading and develop a family-wide reading culture to promote lifelong learning. A community-wide literacy context is a powerful coalition, an investment to help us heal, recover, and flourish in a post-pandemic society.

Program Partnerships: Community partnerships were pillars in the delivery of this program. We launched the pilot program with two committed partners: Okanagan Regional Libraries (ORL) and the University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus (UBC-O). ORL provided a free space for the program to run. UBC-O provided volunteer mentors. Niteo provided the program design and facilitation as well as free books for families to take home each week to begin building their personal household libraries.

Program Location: ORL provided Niteo with free program space at two of their library branches. Running the program in the library setting was important for our desired outcome of supporting families to create their own reading culture. If families could feel connected to and familiar with their local library, we believed there was a greater chance of them continuing to use the library after the program concluded, thus creating sustainable and ongoing access to books for families.

Volunteer Training: UBC-O provided Niteo with volunteer student literacy mentors. UBC-O recruited students and provided 2 initial training workshops: Professionalism & Communication and Anti-Oppression. Niteo provided training for the students by taking them through our microcredential *Leadership in Literacy: The Power of Reading*.

Participant Recruitment: Newcomer families were recruited through utilizing community partners to invite families to register: teachers, librarians, a local nonprofit which provides support to newcomers: Kelowna Community Resources (KCR), and word of mouth through friendships with refugees among our Niteo network. Seven families registered for the program (6 for in-person sessions and 1 for a virtual program).

Program Structure: The in-person sessions followed a consistent format each week modeled after the learning cycle outlined in Niteo’s *Leadership in Literacy* microcredential.

- 1) OVERVIEW
 - a) Opening Introduction and Circle Time
 - b) Group Story Time
- 2) ACTIVITY
 - a) A facilitated group literacy activity
 - b) Individual time for families and their literacy mentors to self select activities (searching for books, reading together, literacy games or worksheets, etc).
- 3) REFLECTION
 - a) Closing Reflection Time (reading poster updates, Niteo book selection, space for reflections & questions)

A feedback survey was sent to parents following the completion of the program. 6 parent participants responded. The volunteer mentors were also surveyed for their responses. 9 volunteers responded. In addition to the surveys, the Niteo program facilitator provided observational feedback based on her interactions with the program participants and volunteers over the course of the pilot program.

The implications for practice

1) Strengthening the network of support around a child contributes to the positive development of the child.

Our program strengthened the connections between the many systems the child participants engage in throughout their lives. We fostered connections between school and family, between family and the Niteo program, between the Niteo program and the library, and between family and the local library.

Throughout the course of the program, children and families developed strong connections to their local library. By reinforcing the joy and importance of reading our program also strengthened the connection between the child and their school. Reading assignments from school could be completed during our program sessions. Our program goals of reading outside of the weekly sessions also fulfilled the expectation for students to be reading daily for their school requirements. The congruence of messaging between school, family, our Niteo program, and the local library created a clear pathway for the growth of the child participants in their literacy skills.

As an example, Niteo's program provided a place of respite, support, and encouragement for the single mother who attended the program with her two children. As the mother was able to relax and feel the weight of her load lightened by the support of the program volunteers, fellow parents, and program facilitator, she was able to be more present, patient, and supportive of her children's reading goals.

Additionally, as families connected with one another and parents became friends, we observed the parents making plans for playdates for their children. As parents were connected to one another, their children became connected, thus strengthening their peer social network. One parent shared: "My son is alone at home (no siblings) so group programs are helpful."

Community links and networks were developed through the program which increases the protective factors and resiliency for the children who participated in the program.

2) After school programs foster positive experiences and attitudes towards literacy learning for children.

Learning in an informal setting emphasizing play and community is a highly effective tool for furthering literacy learning. In *Story as Community*, the joy of reading was demonstrated by the program facilitator, the volunteer mentors, the library staff, parents, and other child participants.

One mother shared how she signed up for the program because her 6 year old daughter was already saying she “hated school.” After four weeks, the mother shared with enthusiasm how both her children were excited to go to the library. At the conclusion of the program, she also reported an increased frequency of her daughter practicing her alphabet letters at home. Another parent shared how the program made her children “excited” to read. She shared how even her youngest child tries to learn with his older siblings.

Literacy games, challenges, and activities were presented in a ‘spirit of play’ where children could self-select their level of participation. Without the pressure of tests and formal classroom structures, along with the addition of community, caring and supportive reading mentors, children were learning through play.

3) *Child centered learning gives children ownership of their learning journey.*

Story as Community gave children and parents opportunities to create their own learning goals. Children could read as much or as little as they wanted. One participant (6 year old boy) set a goal of reading 10 books per week. The goal seemed ambitious and there was skepticism as to whether or not he would be able to reach his goal. He read 10 books per week for the majority of weeks of the program. By giving him the opportunity to create his own goals and take charge of his personal reading journey, he read more than we would have believed he could achieve.

Another volunteer observed how the children she was working with increased the amount of books they were reading each week. In two separate examples, parents gave their children the option of skipping a week of program, however the children were committed to attending. So, parents came because their children were invested. Another mother shared how her son eagerly and consistently asked: “Is it library day today?” A third example, includes a UBC-O *Story as Community* volunteer who read aloud to his child partner each week. But, at the last meeting, the child wanted to read the storybook to him.

There were no passive participants in the program. Ultimately, we observed children invested in their reading goals and commitment to the program.

4) *Parents and caregivers must be empowered to be literacy leaders in their homes.*

In the exit survey, 100% of the families shared a commitment to either maintain their pre-program library access routines or to continue attending the library once per week as a family.

One parent shared how, before *Story as Community*, she rarely read to her son (5 year old) at home. However, as the program continued, her 5 year old son began asking her to read to him at night. They have now created a routine where she reads to him every night before bed.

Another parent shared how she had not been to the library since the birth of her second child, 4 years ago. However, through *Story as Community*, she shared a commitment to attending the library weekly. In addition, a parent who read consistently to his son at home, shared how he developed new reading skills, “I learned how to use my voice better, how to read with expression!”

By engaging parents in their children’s reading and learning progress, parents were equipped to support their children’s ongoing, lifelong learning. The parents understood the children’s goals and were supporting their commitment to read between the weekly *Story as Community* meetings.

5) *Relational bridges to accessing community support and resources foster engagement.*

All of the families were aware of the local library prior to the Niteo program, but there were still barriers to attending. Parents expressed the following reasons for not attending the library consistently: busy schedules, fear of not being able to speak English fluently, and children not being excited to go. Through *Story as Community*, a bridge was crossed from knowledge of the library to involvement in the library. This bridge exemplifies literacy equity.

Story as Community had an 89% attendance rate. The only absences were due to sickness (covid-19 protocols) and a cultural holiday. No family missed more than one session in the program.

A few of the participants signed up because they knew another family was registered in *Story as Community* or a friend/organization they had a pre-existing relationship with, recommended the program to them. Due to the sharing circle at the opening of the program each week, participants built relationships with one another which increased motivation to attend.

Additionally, we intentionally included the library staff in a few of our program sessions to facilitate the bridge from our program to the library itself as part of our goal of sustainable library access for families after the program ended. For example, there was a welcome from the head library, a scavenger hunt, informal introductions, and playful interactions with library staff. As a reciprocal response, families made thank you cards for the library allowing us to use their program space. We had confirmation of a positive relationship, when one of the participants requested to give his thank you card to a specific librarian introduced during the program.

Another parent shared: “I was scared to go to the library because my English is not good.” However, now she has signed up for a library card and has committed to bringing her children to the library on a weekly basis

The relationship capital opened doors of access to the library and literacy support to newcomer families in our community. The safety established created a pathway for families to access books and librarians, thus furthering literacy equity for all participants.

We celebrate the success of the *Story as Community* pilot project! Our world in words becomes a way for us to move together through the suffering of this season into new landscapes of health and adventure. And so, with the inspiration of our childhood communities like the young friends of Winnie the Pooh and the creatures of Narnia, we know together our imaginations can unlock our community resilience because of books. Thus, we will move forward with *Story as Community - Life-Wide Literacy*.

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