



# READINESS TO LEARN IN MINORITY FRANCOPHONE COMMUNITIES

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS



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## Introduction

This summary reports on the *findings of an implementation study of a preschool program* piloted in the *Readiness to Learn in Minority Francophone Communities project*<sup>1</sup> (*Readiness to Learn project*). This demonstration project was part of the Government of Canada's 2003–2008 Action Plan for Official Languages and was continued under the 2008–2013 Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality. Funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) was hired to implement, manage, collect and analyze the project data.

This project explicitly recognizes the influence of a minority linguistic context on the development of linguistic and identity-related dimensions in young children. Past research findings highlight that children's exposure to French in a number of different settings strengthens their identification with and sense of belonging to the Francophone community.

**Note:** The content of this executive summary originates from two reports:

- *Readiness to Learn in Minority Francophone Communities: Project Implementation Report* (2014)
- *Readiness to Learn in Minority Francophone Communities: Report of Findings from the Preschool Phase* (2014)

A copy of these reports can be accessed at [www.srdc.org](http://www.srdc.org).



*The reality of a minority context means that children are exposed to two different cultures at a time when their cultural identity and language skills are developing.* Moreover, sooner or later these children must learn the language of the majority (i.e., English), in addition to their mother tongue, to ensure their full integration into society.

Many Francophone children living in minority environments do not experience the conditions required to develop additive bilingualism.<sup>2</sup> *The literature on bilingualism identifies a mechanism that is relatively clear: exposure to the language.* For bilingualism to be additive, a minimal threshold of exposure to, or use of, the mother tongue must be exceeded. For various reasons, the minimal threshold required is higher when the mother tongue is a minority language.

The dual component preschool program was meant to be a concrete response to this reality. This program innovated through the influence it exercised on the two main environments – daycare and home – most likely to influence the learnings of young children.

<sup>1</sup> Formerly known as the Child Care Pilot Project.

<sup>2</sup> This form of bilingualism refers to individuals who master a second language without incurring any costs in terms of their cultural identity and mother tongue.

## Description of the preschool program

The project tests a preschool program that combines a childcare component (daycare component), developed specifically to meet the needs of Francophone children in minority settings, with a family literacy component targeting the parents of these children. Overall, this program aimed to foster children's school readiness and academic achievement with a focus on the development of French language skills in addition to increasing their knowledge of the French culture as well as their sense of belonging to the Francophone community.

The *daycare component* emphasizes children's exposure to verbal communication through books and songs, while giving them many opportunities to express themselves and develop their vocabulary and communication skills in French. The focus is also on francization and early literacy (including the subthemes of reading and writing). The program favours a play-based approach. This approach encourages children to actively shape their learning environments and fosters creativity, exploration and experimentation.

The programming of the daycare component is based on the Franco-Saskatchewanian junior kindergarten program developed by the Ministry of Education of Saskatchewan (2001) for four-year-olds. An early childhood consultant hired by ESDC adapted the program for the younger population of the *Readiness to Learn project*, that is, three-year-olds. Consistent program delivery is ensured through basic training and follow-ups of child care educators, as well as the commonality of

resources and material distributed to all daycare centres offering the program.

The *family literacy component* complemented the daycare program through group discussions aimed at increasing parents' awareness of their role as their child's first educators and of the particularities of living in a linguistic minority community. The topics addressed focused on:

- providing information to parents on child development, various experiences and periods of socialization;
- properly equipping parents to support their child's French language, cultural, and identity development, whether they lived in a unilingual, bilingual, trilingual or multicultural home; and
- raising parents' awareness of the educator's work and the importance of the complementarity of parent-educator roles in supporting the child who is learning.

The family workshop program was developed specifically for the project by EDUK, in collaboration with ESDC and SRDC.





## Harmonization of the two components

To maximize the influence of the *Readiness to Learn project* on families, the two components, the preschool daycare program and the family literacy program, were harmonized in terms of values, fundamental principles and adopted approaches. To link the two components, the family workshop designers worked closely with the early childhood consultant. This strategy yielded two advantages: fostering a partnership between the various people involved with the child (educator, parents and others) and ensuring continuity in the learning process among settings for the child, whether in the daycare, the family home or the community.

## Implementing the program

The preschool program was delivered in September 2007 to a first cohort of participants from six minority Francophone communities in the following three provinces:

- Cornwall, Durham and Orleans in Ontario;
- Edmundston and Saint-John in New Brunswick; and

- Edmonton in Alberta.

In September 2008, a second cohort of participants was recruited in the communities of Cornwall and Orleans.

Children participated full-time in the daycare component in the first year. In the second year of the program, children's participation varied across communities as a result of some children attending part-time or full-time junior kindergarten. It should be mentioned that during the summer, the program was not delivered as intended in either daycares offering the tested program or in comparison group daycares delivering another program.

The *family workshop component* was only offered in the first year of the program's implementation. The Family Literacy Program comprises 10 workshops (see Table 1 for a list of topics addressed in each workshop). Workshops were offered in daycare classes to provide children with a safe environment adapted to their needs (e.g., tables and chairs were of appropriate size).

**Table 1 Topics and Subtopics of Family Literacy Workshops**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>1 <i>It's fun to learn in French!</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Introduction to the <i>Readiness to Learn</i> project</li> <li>▪ Our children at 18</li> </ul>   | <p><b>6 <i>My Child's Language, Cultural and Identity Development</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The importance of songs, stories and nursery rhymes</li> <li>▪ Additive bilingualism and varieties of French</li> <li>▪ How to stimulate language at home</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>2 <i>I Am My Child's First Educator</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Your role as your child's first educator and scaffolding</li> <li>▪ Parenting styles</li> <li>▪ Different forms of intelligence</li> </ul>                                     | <p><b>7 <i>Communication</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Facilitating communication</li> <li>▪ Verbal and non-verbal communication</li> <li>▪ The role of physical position and attitude in communication</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>3 <i>Early Literacy</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What children learn before they read and write</li> <li>▪ Choosing a good book</li> <li>▪ Shared reading</li> </ul>  | <p><b>8 <i>Family Well-being</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Family changes and values worth passing on</li> <li>▪ Children's needs (according to Maslow)</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>4 <i>Learning: Stimulating Children's Senses</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Overall development</li> <li>▪ How to stimulate your child's learning at home</li> </ul>  | <p><b>9 <i>Living in a Francophone Community</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Activities, resources and services in the Francophone community</li> <li>▪ Differences between the French-language schools and immersion</li> </ul>                                       |
| <p><b>5 <i>My Child's Quest for Independence</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Self-discipline leads to self-esteem</li> <li>▪ The role of emotions in learning and life success</li> <li>▪ Strategies to help children develop self-discipline</li> </ul> | <p><b>10 <i>Celebrations</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Review of what was learned in the family literacy workshops</li> <li>▪ Celebrations and traditions are an integral part of the family</li> </ul>  |

Lasting a total of two hours, each workshop included five components: the greeting component (15 minutes), the parent component (one hour), the child component (took place in parallel to the parent component), the joint parent-child component (30 minutes), and the closing component (15 minutes).

The parent component took place in a room separate from the room in which the child component was offered. The workshop consisted of information transmitted to parents, followed by discussions and exchanges. The child component featured at least one form of multiple intelligences and

one skill related to emergent literacy, writing or numeracy lead by educators. The joint parent-child component involved the parent and child doing activities together. This component enabled parents to put into practise the support strategies discussed earlier in the workshop. This was done with the help of the practitioner of the parent component and the educator. During the closing component, parents were provided with an educational kit that they could take home and that was to be returned at the next workshop. Each kit included two of the following French resources: a book for the parent, a music CD, DVD or educational game,

as well as material and written instructions for a creative activity to do with the child. The creative activity was related to the intelligence form featured during the week and aimed to reinforce what children had learned at the daycare and during the workshop. Families were also invited to visit a Resource Centre, specifically set up for the workshops, to choose a children's book and a parent book, CDs, DVDs, audio books and games.

Several strategies were used to reduce barriers preventing families from participating in the workshops:

- parents were surveyed as to their preferred day and time to attend workshops;
- a meal was offered before or following a workshop;
- parents were regularly contacted to confirm their attendance at workshops;
- drop-in daycare services for siblings of the program group were available for children aged two and a half or older; and
- families could also receive a set compensation for child care costs incurred for children under the age of two and a half.

### Implementation activities: Daycare component

Daycare centres offering the program each received 12 kits of French *resources and material*, each focusing on a topic in addition to an art kit, a science kit and a music kit. The material in the kits included toys, puzzles, books, CDs, musical instruments and material for crafts.

A three-day *basic training* was provided to educators of the first cohort during the summer of 2007. A *refresher training session* was provided to educators of the second cohort in September 2008.

In addition, educators benefited from bimonthly *follow-up training sessions* over a period of one to two years. These sessions took place as long as children participating in the *Readiness to Learn project* were enrolled at the daycare.



### Implementation activities: Family literacy component

Daycare centres also received 300 French resources selected specifically for their suitability for three-year-old children or to assist parents and educators with children of this age. To accommodate a second cohort, approximately 60 additional French resources were sent to the daycare centres in September 2008.

These resources were part of the Resource Centre accessed by families during the time the workshops took place. Resource Centre activities were also a part of the regular activities of the new preschool program following the end of family literacy workshops. Thus, coordinators visited the

classrooms on a weekly basis so that children could borrow a book. Once a week, the coordinator would show up at the daycare at the end of the day to allow parents to visit the Resource Centre with their child and borrow resources. Resource Centre activities ended during the second year of the program in each of the communities.

A three-day **basic training** was also offered to family literacy practitioners of the first cohort during the month of October 2007. A **review booklet** was sent to practitioners engaged in offering the workshops to the second cohort starting in October 2008. This booklet aimed to remind practitioners involved in the delivery of workshops to the first cohort, the key elements of the Family Literacy program.

Partway through the delivery of workshops, trainers arranged for two **follow-up teleconference meetings**. The purpose of these meetings was to get an update on how the workshops were progressing, answer any of the practitioners' questions, and suggest solutions for problems encountered.



## How was the program delivery evaluated?

The implementation study aimed to verify the program's **fidelity** — that is, the correspondence between the applied intervention and the planned program. It also allowed researchers to examine the **quality** of the program delivered — for example, the program's capacity to stimulate children's development. The study was important to assess the **difference and similarities** across daycares offering the piloted program in addition to comparing the tested program with other programs delivered in comparison daycares.

The evaluation of the implementation of the preschool program was based on observation grids used in daycare classes and family literacy workshops, in-depth interviews of educators and family literacy practitioners, child attendance records at the daycare and at the workshops, as well as measures of parents' participation in the workshops. Measures specific to the implementation of the family literacy workshops included a logistics survey and a post-intervention survey completed by parents.

## Main findings: Daycare component

### Implementation fidelity

In contrast to comparison daycare classes, program daycare classes more often implemented key **structural elements** of the piloted program, which consisted of:

- learning centres clearly identified with a picture accompanied by the matching word;

- cards displaying a picture and matching word displayed at children's eye level;
- a themed program of weekly activities, displayed and utilized;
- activities planned around the monthly theme;
- a routine chart displayed and used by educators;
- display of arts and crafts at children's eye level; and
- the child's name written on the front of all the artwork.

Program Daycare educators also facilitated a greater number of activities known to encourage the *development of children's skills in French reading, communication, and pre-writing, as well as their creativity*.

Lastly, the use of songs and nursery rhymes was consistent among program and comparison daycare classes, as were opportunities for encouraging reasoning and the development of autonomy, and strategies to facilitate transitions.



## Structural and content quality

The *quality of indoor space, health practices and safety measures, as well as greeting/departing practices* proved to be good to excellent across program group daycares and comparison group daycares.

In contrast, the *quality of the educational content* was found to be superior in program daycares relative to what was observed in comparison daycares. In fact, program daycare educators paid particular attention to activities that encouraged children to communicate and enrich their vocabulary. Activities performed included:

- encouraging *children to express* themselves by initiating conversations with them and encouraging children to speak to each other;
- *initiating conversations* during activities or free play outside of circle time;
- encouraging *reasoning* among children, an activity associated with the development of language and of logical thinking in children; and
- *reading books* to children.

In addition, children enrolled in daycares offering the program had greater access than comparison daycare children to resources in French in the class. Finally, educators in both program and comparison group daycares were very sensitive to children's needs.

## Educators' reactions to the program

Educators delivering the tested program especially liked:

- the content of circle time, which they believed was effective in meeting the

needs of children in minority settings;  
and

- the routine chart, which showed children the order in which the day's activities were planned.

In contrast, the creativity element of the program led to mixed reactions by educators. Although educators liked this aspect of the program, some said they had trouble implementing it. Finally, the program element least appreciated by educators was the requirement to always speak French, even to Anglophone children.

### Facilitators and barriers

According to the educators and trainer, the main facilitating elements to implementation of the daycare component were:

- management support for the program;
- teamwork by educators;
- the material supplied to the daycares;
- the program's flexibility;
- follow-ups by the trainer; and
- the support from community coordinators.

A few other facilitators were mentioned by the trainer:

- the educators' openness to feedback and new ideas; and
- their experience working with children.

Conversely, the absence of these factors was an obstacle to program implementation. Other challenges mentioned were the time required to deliver a quality program, the difficulty of addressing certain themes, and educator turnover in the daycares offering the tested program.

### Perceived outcomes

The educators highlighted the positive contribution of several elements of the program on children's behaviours. For instance, the routine chart encouraged children to be independent and to feel calm and secure, as well as to better understand the routine and to develop more of a space-time reference. They also thought that the program helped them properly prepare children for school. This preparation involved several aspects, in particular children's ability to follow a routine, meet the expectations of the school environment, and develop their autonomy. Several educators believed that the program helped children improve their French language and literacy skills.

As for educators themselves, the program and follow-up training provided an opportunity to strengthen their knowledge of child development. They also modified some of their practices, including in particular a greater focus on children's needs, the use of a weekly program, and encouraging children's creativity. Lastly, several educators noted an improved relationship with parents.



## Main findings: Family literacy component

Overall, the delivery of Family Literacy Program was judged as being good. We noted:

- the program delivered was of high fidelity – 98% of the mandatory content was covered;
- the facilitation was of quality – practitioners were perceived as engaging and respectful;
- the spatial environment of the workshops’ parent component encouraged participation, except at two sites;
- the average participation rate was 64%;
- the rate of participation was highest for the first four workshops in comparison to the last six workshops (see Table 2 for the average rate of participation for each workshop); and
- a widespread practice of exceeding the allotted time for each workshop, which in turn negatively affected the quality of the delivery.

The main improvements considered for the parent component were to reduce the amount of content communicated in a workshop and the overall number of workshops.

### Parents’ reactions to the workshops

Parents reacted positively to most workshop topics. In particular, they:

- preferred the topics discussed in workshops 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 9 (see Table 2);
- particularly liked workshop 2 “I Am My Child’s First Educator”; and

- very much appreciated discussing with other parents the joint parent–child component, and accessing French-language resources.

**Table 2 Participation rate per workshop**

| Workshop topics   | Participation rate |
|---|--------------------|
| No. 1: It’s fun to learn in French!                             | 77%                |
| No. 2: I Am My Child’s First Educator                           | 80%                |
| No. 3: Early Literacy   | 69%                |
| No. 4: Learning: Stimulating Children’s Senses                  | 73%                |
| No. 5: My Child’s Quest for Independence                        | 63%                |
| No. 6: My Child’s Linguistic, Cultural and Identity Development | 53%                |
| No. 7: Communication  | 57%                |
| No. 8: Family Well-being  | 50%                |
| No. 9: Living in a Francophone Community                        | 51%                |
| No. 10: Celebrations  | 63%                |

### Facilitators and barriers

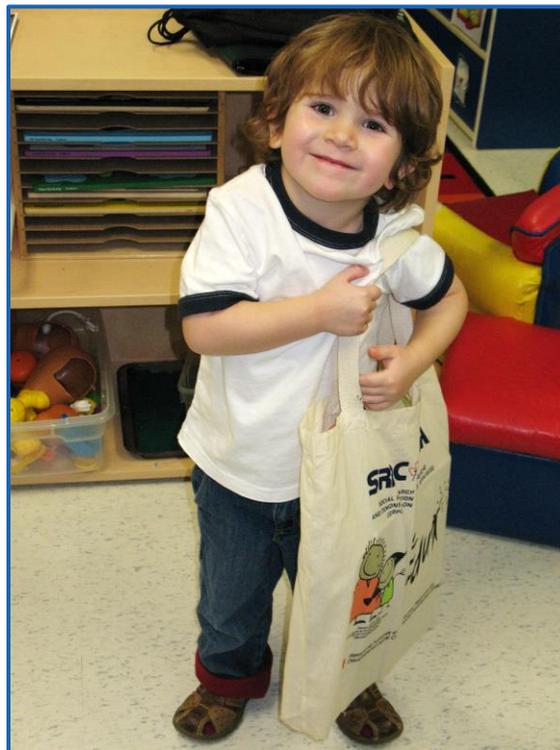
The foremost *facilitator* to participation was to provide families with a meal. Meal time was an opportunity for parents to spend time with their child, exchange information with their child’s educator, who was also present, and chat with other parents. The second facilitator was the joint parent–child component. Children were very happy to show their parents their latest creations and parents could appreciate the activities done by their children at the daycare. Finally, parents really enjoyed the fact that the workshops gave them access to French resources through the learning kits.

The main *barrier* to parental participation was the demands incurred by attending a weekly workshop and what that represented in terms of an already busy work–family life. Several parents suggested that workshops be more spaced out over time. A review of available documents underlined the near absence of data on the optimal number of workshops required to observe an effect. Rather, the literature on family literacy focused on the importance of engaging parents in a continuous process, as well as on the greater benefits achieved by parents with shorter rather than longer workshops. These conclusions mirror parents’ suggestions of holding workshops over a longer period of time. This strategy may encourage parents to participate more in workshops.

### Perceived outcomes

One of the main *outcomes* of the family literacy workshops was the strengthened relationship between parents and educators. Having the educators at the workshops resulted in the workshops running more smoothly by allowing children to have an adult they loved and knew well with them. It also allowed parents and educators to talk and get to know each other better. Furthermore, the educators’ presence at the family workshops strengthened the complementarity of the two program components.

Lastly, the family workshops conveyed two important messages to parents. The first concerned parents’ role as their child’s first educator — that is, the importance of doing activities with their child that would prepare him or her for school (e.g., reading). The second message pertained to the importance of exposing their child to French in order to counterbalance the primarily Anglophone



environment. While the first message applied to most parents, the second did not affect all parents in the same way. Some Francophone families living in an environment where few people spoke English found the message interesting, but not very relevant to their situation. It raised their awareness of other families. However, some parents of exogamous families were shocked by the emphasis placed on French in the workshops. It is therefore vital that the message be adapted to clients participating in the workshops and that parents understand the richness of the additive form of bilingualism for both the child and themselves.



## Closing thoughts

The purpose of the Readiness to Learn in Minority Francophone Communities project was to understand how a program targeting these children can help them master the language of instruction in the short term, and, in the longer term, increase their chances of academic success. Based on the findings of the implementation study, we conclude that the program delivery was characterized by a high degree of integrity in terms of both structural elements and the fidelity and quality of its educational content over the two years of the program. In addition, the tested program differed from existing programs offered in comparison daycares by its fidelity and quality. Together, these findings are key to increasing our confidence that the observed changes in children's development can be linked to the tested program.

In order to obtain such results, the program required the contributions from a number of resources and materials. More significant were the contributions of human resources. Indeed, such a program could not be implemented without parent participation. Parents must attend the workshops and use the strategies introduced in the workshops at

home so that their children get the maximum benefit from environments where French is spoken and valued. The program's success also depends on the engagement of daycare educators who are involved in setting up the program in full (as intended) and of quality, otherwise the children may not benefit from its effects. Finally, the community is partly responsible for the program's success. The more key early childhood players are engaged in the program, the more likely the program is going to have a long-term effect on mobilizing the Francophone community around the children who will ensure its future.

## Acknowledgements

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