

Mid-Point Evaluation of the Homework Help Program



Adult Literacy Research Institute



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Centre for Excellence in
Foundational Learning



Program Description

This program sought to engage families in building their literacy and essential skills (LES) through providing parents and their children from the Forest Lawn community with a more intensive, facilitated learning environment. In order to ensure sufficient investment from program participants, the program partners engaged in a community consultation with local schools and community agencies in the Forest Lawn area. The “Homework Help” program aimed to draw in adults who might not typically access a literacy program for themselves, but would be willing to do so for their children. In this way, the adults were able to access a safe bridge to learning.

Families in this program worked on building skills to not only assist with their children’s homework, but to also work on their own learning skills. Parents received assistance and guidance with how to help their children, in seeking answers using free resources (i.e. YouTube tutorial videos, Khan Academy), and in building personal LES skills and strategies through the entire process. Parents and children built on their reading, writing, numeracy, and computer use skills while also increasing their capacity to support their children’s education. Children were offered a supportive environment within which to engage in additional learning, bond with their parents through learning, and build the family’s collective identity as lifelong learners. Participants received a certificate upon completion of the program to recognize their commitment to lifelong learning.

Background

The goals of the Homework Help Program Evaluation are:

- To identify participants confidence level in LES skills and ability to assist their child's education,
- To establish their familiarity with Calgary Public Library and Bow Valley College; using resources for themselves or for their child,
- To identify challenges that affects achievement of any of the project's objectives, and
- To offer recommendations and considerations for program sustainability.

Intended Program Outcomes

The intended outcomes of the Homework Help program are as follows:

- Parents and children would build literacy and essential skills while having an opportunity to enhance the families' collective skills as lifelong learners,
- Parents would experience an increased sense in their ability to contribute to their children's' learning,
- Parents would be guided through different strategies to help their children acquire or build new learning skills and would be taught how to utilize common resources available to them through a variety of different modalities (i.e. technology, the library, etc.),
- Adults with foundational literacy skills will be facilitated to engage in increasing their LES through their investment in their children's learning, and

- Adults with foundational literacy skills will experience a strengthened, familiarized pathway to learning opportunities available to them.

Findings

Date of Program: October 2015 – December 2015

Number of Staff: 2 Calgary Public Library Facilitators & 2 Bow Valley College Facilitators

Family Attendance: Total of 6 Families attended the Homework Help program

Data Collection Methods: Conducted Participant Survey, Interview with Project Lead and Facilitator

Attending participants were surveyed to gather more information about their awareness of services, their LES learning goals, the usefulness of the Homework Help program, and to provide an opportunity for additional feedback. Participants were provided with a plain language evaluation form, and assisted as needed, to share their thoughts with the evaluator:

- 33% of participants were very aware of the resources and programs available at Bow Valley College and the Calgary Public Library.
- 33% of participants were somewhat aware of resources and programs available, though more identified an awareness with Calgary Public Library's programs.
- 33% of participants indicated that they were not at all aware of resources and programs at Bow Valley College and Calgary Public Library.
- 60% of participants indicated that they were not at all aware of community literacy programs.

- 40% of participants indicated that they were somewhat aware of community literacy programs, though most indicated that they had more of a familiarity with the Calgary Public Library.
- Participants indicated an awareness of some tools/resources available to assist with their children's homework: their children's school, the library, the internet, and book.
- 60% of respondents indicated that they experience challenges or obstacles to help their child with homework "all the time."
- Parents identified that they struggle with how to make reading interesting, math, reading, writing, and trying to meet the their child's home reading requirements (ex. Most teachers assign 20-30 minutes of home reading to students in elementary school).
- 60% of respondents indicated that they used what they learned in the Homework Help program all of the time, while 30% indicated they used what they learned at least part of the time.
- 30% of respondents indicated they would not be pursuing further literacy-based programming at this time, while 60% indicated that they were exploring further educational options for themselves.

Overall, participants increased their confidence in assisting their children with homework, building their own skills to access resources around learning, gained an understanding of the supports provided by the Calgary Public Library and learning opportunities available at Bow Valley College. More continuous attendance would have provided an opportunity for further benefit from the program.

The Homework Help program did not maintain continuous attendance of participants, as had been the original goal, however a number of the intended outcomes were achieved and the lessons learned will be invaluable to future iterations of this program. Parents received supportive, patient guidance from Bow Valley College instructors and the staff support from the Calgary Public Library, resulting in a stronger connection to community learning resources and potential pathways for literacy learning.

The Project Team engaged in reflective, responsive practices to try to maximize the learning opportunities available to participants, despite the fact that many of the participants were navigating challenging personal crises. Through ongoing collaboration with community representatives and resources, Bow Valley College and the Calgary Public Library staff involved were able to enhance their understanding of the complexities experienced by foundational learners and their families. Participants learned strategies to assist them in their own learning while supporting the learning of their children in an environment that was focused on strengths, rather than deficits.

The following quotes highlight some of the important outcomes resulting from the pilot of the Homework Help Program:

“Even though the attendance waivered, there was positive feedback frequently during my calls reminding families and even from one teacher who had seen the flyer and noticed her student was referencing our program. She phoned to say that her student who had attended Homework Help was explaining to her and to his classmates that you need a quiet place to study and talked about how to organize your studying time.”

“Other parents ...were appreciative of the program and found that being able to have a meal and get help with transportation made it easier to come.”

“The program really helped me with my daughter. It taught me to be patient and that it’s okay to read out loud even if she is age 11.”

“Program was worthwhile, we received great feedback from parents. They really enjoyed all aspects of the program.”

Lessons Learned

The following summarizes the lessons learned from the pilot of the Homework Help program, gathered collectively from participant observations, community representatives, the Facilitators, the Project Lead, and from the Evaluator:

- The goal was to provide a program that aimed to have continual attendance in a high needs, high crisis community. Through speaking with community agencies and some participants, there was a realization that, though many participants expressed significant interest in the program, other crises often took precedence over continuous attendance, such as fighting an eviction or attending to major health symptoms. In conversations with fellow community representatives, it seems continuous attendance is an issue that other programs struggle with in this community.
- Literacy skills were a barrier. The title of the program was confusing to some participants. Parents thought they were supposed to drop their kids off and carry

on. The program has taken this into consideration for the next round, renaming the second iteration as “Family Literacy Dinner.”

- Location change created confusion issues. The location changed from the public library to a local school due to renovations at the Forest Lawn Public Library that went past the planned deadline. Even though the new location was in close proximity, participants experienced trouble locating the program. The location was unfamiliar to some parents. They have taken this feedback into consideration for the next round and have chosen to host the program at Village Square, a well-known library location to families that is still accessible to families from Forest Lawn, but also opens up to a wider community on a major road.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations collected from the Project Lead and Program Facilitator:

- For future programming in high crisis communities, use short term programming and either the duration from 6 to 4 weeks or create literacy skill building around crisis management (i.e. interpreting forms, seeking community services, etc.).
- Better marketing the program can help increase the participation. Provide flyers to CUPS, Alex Community Health Centre or other outreach community agencies.
- Design program curriculum on a drop-in basis, not on a continuous term. Since the number of participants fluctuated, it is important to ensure there is material for both drop-in participants and ongoing participants.

- Provide handouts or booklets about community outreach agencies such as the Food Bank, health clinics. They were requested by participants.
- Ensure there is time at the beginning of each session to review the purpose of the program. Some participants had trouble understanding the purpose of the program and what services it offered. In future iterations, it would be helpful to first offer an information night prior to the start of the program so participants can gain a clear understanding of the intent of the program.
- Ensure location of program is clear and emphasized in recruitment materials. The flyers had both the BVC and CPL logo on it, leading to parents thinking the program would be at either Bow Valley College or Calgary Public Library.

Conclusion

The first pilot of the Homework Help program successfully bridged literacy and essential skills learning to participants in the Forest Lawn community, however not within the original intentions of the program's design. Families who attended the program spoke to an increased understanding of supports and resources available to assist them in helping their children with homework. Children who attended the program built strategies around problem solving and were given an opportunity to participate in a supportive learning environment with their parents. Lifelong learning was modelled to all throughout the process. The unintended outcomes of the Homework Help program provided invaluable lessons for future program planning.

Overall, the Homework Help program was considered a success and of benefit to its participants. The facilitators navigated multiple challenges and were able to sustain a

positive learning environment and build on participants' literacy and essential skills. The lessons learned from the first phase of piloting the Homework Help have been incorporated into the planning for the second piloting phase of this program and will serve to strengthen connections with families and supports in a high need community.