

Groundworks Magazine

Isaiah

By Jodi McBride

I sat across the kidney shaped table as tears poured down Paula's narrow face. "I didn't know I was supposed to read to him," she said. "No one ever told me I was supposed to read to him."

Her son, Isaiah, was in my grade four class. On most days, Isaiah came to school 30 minutes early to read with me. He read at a grade one level, making it nearly impossible for him to succeed in grade four.

Isaiah never brought a lunch or snacks to school. He wore the same clothes almost every day. He fell asleep in class every day and when he was awake, he had major behavior problems. He was my favorite student.

Paula did the best that she knew how in raising Isaiah, which meant doing whatever it took to keep herself and him off the streets. She waitressed during the day and was a prostitute at night. She shared a bedroom with Isaiah. When she was home, Isaiah blocked out noise and visitors by watching TV or playing video games.

"Illiteracy and poverty constitute a mutually reinforcing vicious cycle that is difficult to break (UNESCO)." Isaiah got stuck in the cycle.

Over the last decade, 33% of children in BC have begun their turn of this cycle and were behind at the beginning of kindergarten. From 2010 to 2011, BC's child poverty rate rose from 14.3% to 18.6%, meaning "the number of poor children in BC was 153,000—enough children to fill the Canucks' stadium over eight times (2013 Child Poverty Report Card)."

In Canada, 42% of Canadian adults between ages 16 and 65 have low literacy skills and only 66% of adults with literacy skills below Level 3 (the level considered sufficient for daily life) are employed (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, Canadian Council on Learning 2008).

Statistics go on to show that adults with Level 5 literacy skills earn about 68% more than those with Level 1 literacy skills; and 48% of poor children are ready for school at age 5 compared to 75% of children from middle and higher income families (Coulombe & Tremloay, Isaacs, J.B. 2012).

This leaves a gap that perpetuates the cycle: children without adequate resources before they begin school, who likely become adults with low education just trying to make ends meet.

As a society, a community, how do we break the cycle?

Perhaps by raising awareness of the importance of literacy and the impact it has on individuals and society, and filling gaps with barrier free literacy programs that meet both children and adults where they are at.

Did you know the "National Center for Family Literacy's long-term research with 2,000 families that attended family literacy programs shows that literacy intervention reduced participants' full dependence on public assistance from 67% to 11% (Literacy BC)."

Additionally "Researchers estimate that over the lifetime of participants in an early literacy intervention program, returns to the public are \$7.16 for every dollar invested (Schweinhart et al., 1993)."

Access to literacy opens the door to learning opportunities that contribute to life skills, a higher quality of life and economic development.

“In this perspective, it is not literacy on its own that makes a difference, but rather what it enables people to do in order to benefit from new freedoms and capabilities to address poverty – accessing information, using services they have a right to and reducing vulnerability to disease or ecological change (UNESCO).”

If as a community, we can help lay the foundation with literacy for children and adults, perhaps we can stop the cycle of illiteracy and poverty. Perhaps we can better help kids like Isaiah.