



A Review of the Literature on Family Literacy

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for the*



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**FAMILY
LITERACY
PRACTICES**
in the home
and community

LITERATURE REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

This literature review has been developed as part of a larger project which will result in the development of a provincial framework for Family Literacy in New Brunswick.

This purpose of this document is to:

- Provide an overview of current literature and key issues related to family literacy, and
- Inform the discussions of the New Brunswick Forum on Family Literacy 2008 taking place in Fredericton, New Brunswick, June 24-25, 2008.

DEFINING FAMILY LITERACY

What do we mean by family literacy and why does it matter?

One of the outcomes of the 2007 Forum on Family Literacy hosted by the Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick was the discovery that “we did not even have a shared definition of family literacy to work from”. Participants recognized that a common understanding of what we mean by family literacy would make it easier to communicate and work collaboratively towards a common goal. A definition carries with it underlying principles and beliefs that profoundly influence how we shape our family literacy programs.

Arriving at a common definition of family literacy is not merely an academic exercise. The way in which we define *family literacy* has significant implications for program practice, policy and funding.

Defining “family literacy” is, and should be, an on-going conversation. For the purpose of the New Brunswick Family Literacy Forum 2008 Advisory Committee:

Family literacy refers to the literacy practices of parents, children and family members as they go about their daily lives and negotiate relationships both within the family and between the family and the broader community.

The literacy practices of the broader community *influence* and are *influenced* by the literacy practices of families.

Family literacy practices are **diverse, socially embedded** and **culture specific**.

Defining Family Literacy

Family literacy is a complex concept with many dimensions. Defining its meaning has been an on-going conversation. For the purpose of the Family Literacy Forum 2008 Advisory Committee:

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Family literacies are diverse, socially embedded and culture specific.



Providing Family Literacy Learning and Support Programs

How do we create programs that recognize family literacy as social and cultural practice?

How do we build a more collaborative approach to family literacy programming in New Brunswick?



Definition of terms

Literacy is more than a set of neutral and objective skills

Paulo Freire maintained that literacy is and should be more than a set of neutral and objective skills. Literacy allows people to “read the world rather than just the word”. It involves using the different forms of communication beyond reading and writing, which give us further opportunities in our society — for ourselves, our families, and our communities. Literacy helps us understand the world we live in and also helps us understand ourselves and express our identity, our ideas and our cultures (Casper, 2003).

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Diverse	Family literacy practices are many and varied. They are dynamic and remain fluid to fit ever changing circumstances.
Socially embedded	According to Wikipedia, “social” is defined as “self in relationship to others”. Social embeddedness is about the idea that family literacy practices are carried out within the social context of the family in the home or broader community.
Culture	Culture can be defined as “how we do things around here”. It refers to more than language, race, social class, gender, religion, geographical location or country of origin. Each family has its own unique way of doing things or “culture”. Research reveals the occurrence of a “wide range of culturally specific literacy practices among different communities” (Casper, 2003).
Negotiate	To “deal with” or “maneuver”; <i>to build, maintain and handle relationships.</i>
Literacy	Today, literacy is defined broadly as set of social and cultural practices not simply a skill learned through formal schooling.
Family life	Family life is a distinct domain for literacy that is woven into the everyday stream of activities where the purposes, values and the roles of families may differ from the formal literacy needed for success in school.”(Gates, 1997; Heath, 1983, Hicks, 2000; Purcell-Taylor & DorseyGaines, 1988; Valdes, 1996; Wasson-Ellam, 2001).
Literacies	The term “literacy” in the singular is being replaced by the term “literacies” to capture its plurality. We see references to multiple and multimodal literacies and discussion of “school literacies”, “media literacies”, “bureaucratic literacies” and computer literacies to name a few.
Intergenerational literacy	Programs that focus on both children and adult are considered to be intergenerational. They may include parents, siblings, other significant adults, family members and caregivers or guardians. Typically when the term <i>intergenerational literacy</i> appears, reference is being made to what the adults are learning as they participate and is not limited to how they relate to the children in the program or class.

KEY THEMES AND ISSUES

Family literacy programs

What qualifies as a family literacy program?

Many different groups or agencies offer a variety of activities, programs and services to provide learning and support for family literacy. This may be only one component of a program or it may be the program's whole reason for being.

In *Language, Literacy Healthy Development*, a report on the work of CAPC & CPNP projects, Nason and Whitty (2004) list several examples of family literacy events and initiatives. These include: Story tents, Library story times, Family Literacy Day celebrations, Book fairs, Reading Circles, Book giveaways.

Categorizing family literacy programs

Nickse (1989) used four categories to classify programs based on the extent to which they focus on the adult and child.

Direct Adult / Direct Child Programming is for both parent and preschool child. Parents receive a program of literacy education; children take part in structured early childhood programs.	Direct Adult / Indirect Child Adults are the main focus and children are not involved on a regular basis. May include literacy or ESL instruction, or instruction in reading to children and other strategies for promoting children's literacy education.
Indirect Adult / Direct Child Preschool and school-aged children are primary recipients. Parents may be invited to participate but usually do not receive literacy education and support for their own needs.	Indirect Adult / Indirect Child Adults and children together. The goal is the promotion of literacy practices such as reading for enjoyment. Examples: library story times, Reading Buddies programs, book talks.

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(The description for these categories was adapted from *Live, Horse, Til the Grass Grows!* Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick, 2006, p.17).

Nickse's typology allows for the inclusion of adult literacy education and casual events in which literacy learning is incidental under the 'family literacy umbrella', even when these events do not involve children at all. The assumption is that anything that involves adults who are parents also involves the child indirectly. Although this is true, there are serious implications when it comes to allocating resources for literacy education.

Family literacy programs

Categorization, continued...

Sharon Skage (2001) (Foundational Family Literacy Training) provides a broad definition for what constitutes a family literacy program. She categorizes programs according to type of activities and provisions.

The 7 Categories of Family Literacy Outlined by Sharon Skage (2001) are listed in order from most intensive to least intensive.



Intergenerational Projects
Focus on Parent or Primary Caregiver
Parental Involvement
Family Literacy Activities for the General Public
Projects for Family Literacy Resources
Family Literacy Professional Training and Resources
Resources for the General Public

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“Current literature indicates that programs that involve both children and parents intensively over a period of time have been found to produce the most measurable, positive outcomes” (Nason & Whitty, 2004, p. 44)

While most experts agree that a range of program types can and should exist, they insist that some initiatives are not comprehensive enough to pass as family literacy programming. They argue, for example, that a program that merely encourages parents to read to children does not merit the family literacy program label.

For some, “true family literacy initiatives” must have both parents and children as beneficiaries (LCNB, 2002, p.4).

USA Legislated Program model

The United States government mandates that in order to be recognized and funded, family literacy program must include four separate components which include:

- Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children.
- Training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children.
- Parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency.
- An age-appropriate education program to prepare children for success in school and life experiences

(No Child Left Behind Act of 2001).

The entrenchment of this approach in legislation is widely criticized on the grounds that it goes against the nature of family literacy. It promotes a “one size fits all” approach to service and reduces “family literacy” to welfare reform – in particular workfare with which program activities are closely aligned. This legislated model is based on the compensatory driven Kenan model, which has been criticized by Hannon (2001) as being a “restrictive” rather than a “comprehensive” mode.

Call for flexible and responsive program models

In the Training Manual for *Parenting for a Literate Community* (Nason and Homer, 1999) published by the early Childhood Centre, University of New Brunswick, the project’s program approach is described as:

“...flexible and responsive to emerging family needs and priorities. It is an approach to literacy learning which honours every day life and diverse family activities and draws upon resources in domestic and community contexts. The family’s own everyday experiences and stories are celebrated and used as the springboard for developing literacy teaching and learning”.

Understanding family literacy as social practice

How do families acquire, use and value literacy?

Studies, which document literacy practices within homes and communities (Heath, Taylor, 1983; Dorsey Gaines, 199; Barton, 1997), recognize family literacy as diverse and complex social practice rooted in broader social goals and cultural practices. Literacy is seen as a means to an end. How families use literacy varies according to the positions they occupy in cultural groups and social hierarchies. Family literacy practices are very diverse, not only in their purposes, content and skills, but also in the means that are used. In her publication, *Many Families, Many Literacies* (1997), Denny Taylor addresses the need to listen to families and communities rather than impose models which may be unsuitable or unattractive to families in particular areas.

Literacy practices and power relations

Understanding family literacy as social practice has helped us to appreciate the way in which power relations, including those having to do with gender, social class, ethnicity, ability and age, are reflected and preserved through the word - spoken, printed, and enacted. When families interact with each other, and with/in other social institutions, some literacy practices carry more weight, or 'cultural capital', than others, and function 'to empower or disempower people' (Friere and Macedo 1987).

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“Race, gender and socio-economic status are all factors that critically affect whose ‘literacy’ counts. Some (of these) literacies have become powerful and dominant, while others have been constrained and devalued. The problem is not so much a lack of literacy as a lack of social justice.”

(Taylor 1997)

Language works to transmit value systems that validate power imbalances

Many authors have documented the way in which the strengths of children are discounted because their languages and/or literacies are a poor fit for the dominant literacies that the schools value, recognize and uphold as neutral (Tett, 2000).

In *The practice of literacy in an unjust world*, Rodriguez & Crozier (2001), illustrate how language works to transmit 'value systems that validate power imbalances,' which enable the continued enactment of racism and other forms of discrimination in Canada. They suggest that, to redress inequities, literacy needs to be understood in its socio-political context, and the practice of family literacy education should be informed by inclusive, critical and liberatory pedagogies.

Teaching methods and program content

Debate about appropriate teaching methods and content in family literacy programs

Although there is widespread agreement about the importance of home literacy practices, there is debate over the appropriate teaching methods and content in family literacy programs. Some critics argue that:

- Not enough is known in relation to family literacy about the most effective ways for parents to help their children (Hannon, 1995, 2000, Saracho, 1997).
- Some family literacy programs treat families as though they were all the same. These programs are seen as having simplistic notions of both “family” and “literacy” (Bates, Taylor and Tomlin, 1994).
- A tendency exists to blame children’s poor literacy achievement to deficiencies in the home environment, rather than to school practices (Auerbach, 1994; Cairney, 1995, 2000; Freebody, 1996). A closer examination of the relationship between home and school communities is needed for the development of effective collaborations between parents and teachers.

Domestication of women

Since family literacy programs often target and attract women, they have the potential to reinforce gender stereotypes of literacy work within families (Cairney, 1995; Freebody, 1996; Luttrell, 1996). Critics caution programs against unwittingly promoting “literacy for domestication rather than literacy for empowerment” (Ramdas, 1990).

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Programs that train parents as teacher aides to support and enhance child literacy only, without regard for broader dimensions of adult learning, can be viewed as programs of domestication. This promotes a limited view of women’s role which focuses on volunteer labour, minimal autonomy and fulfillment through domestic aspirations.

Family literacy programs as part of the social change paradigm

Critics argue that some family literacy programs present notions of family and literacy that are divorced from their social and political contexts. Perhaps the most influential proponent of this paradigm was Paulo Freire. Family literacy programs that adhere to Freire’s concept of literacy are considered part of the social change paradigm (Auerbach, 1995; Neuman, 1995). These programs consider it important to maintain participant control, use dialogue as a key aspect of the program, and centre program content on critical issues from participants’ real lives, helping to create opportunities for action and social change.

It's more than simply telling a parent to read to a child

Parent-child interactions are important to a child's developing literacy abilities. However these interactions involve a good deal more than simply reading to children and providing them with books.

- Simply telling a parent to read to a child may lead to quite different behaviors depending upon the background of the parent. Some of these behaviors may even be counter-productive.
- The way in which a parent speaks with a child may have as much or more to do with later reading achievement of the child than actual time spent reading to the child.

Some educators suggest that this information be ignored, since it implies low-income parents may in some way be deficient. They maintain that it is better to focus upon literacy instruction designed to give parents more control over their world. If this is done, all else will follow. Others point to successes in teaching literacy and parenting strategies to new parents and point out that many parents want to know how to improve the literacy of their children. (Taken from *Working Notes on Literature Review FLIP Project*, (Nason 2006).

Library Trends

10 An article on community literacy published in *Language and Literacy* reports that a growing trend in libraries is to sponsor literacy programs such as story hour, workshops on reading to children and how to use the computer. These programs help to institutionalize ideas about what children need to know, how they come to know, the level they need to achieve and what is appropriate use of children's out of school time (Wason-Ellam et al. 2004).

What do children read in the public library?

The study by Wason-Ellen revealed the following information about children's activities in the library:

- Children came to play computer games.
- Children checked out videos more than books.
- Children rarely chose quality children's books. Parents never mentioned choosing books with varied plots, imaginative writing, memorable characters or innovative illustrations. Instead they preferred more cartoon-like illustrations such as *Barney*, or *Goose Bumps* rather than those with artistic merit.

Media technology reshapes literacy practices in profound and unexpected ways.

When using computer games children appear to be learning language skills more mechanical versus engaging in reading as an interactive process.

Kline (1993) cautions about substituting commercial programs for traditional patterns of family relations. Example taped stories or “call on line to hear a story” programs: He points out that something is missing from childhood when we give a child a tape of children’s songs because we don’t have time to sing with them. TV and other technologies cannot be ignored and must be taken seriously as social practice and a social text. However new technologies supplement rather than replace oral and print literacies. As children become multi-literate and multi-modal, they will still need to read to read print for a wide range of social practices and they will need books for pleasure.

Importance of the early years as critical years for language and literacy development

It is well recognized that the early years are the formative years upon which all future learning depends. Since the 19th century, pioneers in early childhood education have recognized the importance of a stimulating environment for optimum early development. Pestolozzi, Montessori and the McMillan sisters all designed environments for young children to cultivate the connection between action, language and thought, and to ‘rescue’ children from social disadvantage (Dowling, 1988).

Connecting action, play, language and thought, and purposeful writing

The importance of engaging young children in purposeful drawing, writing and reading in authentic social contexts had been introduced by the early 20th century. For example, Susan Isaacs a prominent British pre-school educator in the early twentieth century documented her experience in cultivating reading and writing with young children at the Malting House school.

Foundations of contemporary early literacy education

These early beginnings set the stage for what is considered to be good early literacy practice in Canada today. The importance of action, play and language for the construction, thought, and practice of literacy in meaningful social contexts have endured in ‘best practices’ for young children’s literacy learning (IRA/NAEYC statement). They have been refined and confirmed throughout the twentieth century by practitioners and scholars from a variety of disciplines.

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Deficit discourse—the autonomous model versus the ideological model

Family as the site for literacy education

Given that the early years are lived, for the most part, within families in Canada, contemporary theory, research and practice on early language and literacy inevitably points to the family as the site for early literacy education. However, the way in which the family is implicated in literacy education has been the cause of much debate. Street's models of literacy may illuminate this debate.

Street (1997) notes that two models of literacy exist: the autonomous and the ideological. Of the autonomous model he says:

“The autonomous model isolates literacy as an independent variable and then claims to be able to study its consequences. These consequences are then classically presented in terms of economic ‘take off’ or in terms of cognitive skills’.

(Street, 1984. p.3)

It is this way of thinking about literacy that has enabled the “problem of illiteracy” to be located within the family. Illiteracy is seen as naming the root cause as a deficit within the family or a ‘cultural deficit’ which can be ‘fixed’ using family literacy schemes to infiltrate schooled and middle class values and forms of literacy into diverse homes. These homes were seen as lacking qualities of educational support and cognitive skills required of formal schooling, which was taken to be why so many of them ‘failed’ in the school system (Street, 1997; Gadsen, 1996). This deficit discourse, although now considered politically incorrect, still endures in the guise of ‘intervention’ which purports to be ‘strengths-based’ (Auerbach, 1995).

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In contrast, the *ideological model* stresses ‘the significance of the socialization process in the construction of meaning for the participants’ (Street, 1984 p9). ‘Seeing literacy not just as a single, unitary phenomenon attached to formal education, but as a variety of social practices... shifts the epistemological ground’ (Street 1997, p210).

Are standardized tests of literacy skills culturally biased?

Thinking about literacy as ‘a set of social practices that vary across contexts and cultures’ (Cairney, 1996 p.63), requires consideration of how these contexts and cultures interplay. In this way of thinking, standardized tests of literacy skills would be, by definition, culturally biased. Explanations for variability in performance on such tests have to be sought not within the person or particular cultural context, but in the relationships between contexts and cultures and the power relations that are played out in social hierarchies.

Family literacy and the pressure for “school readiness”

The demand for programs and families to produce “school ready” children has a profound impact on family literacy programs. Expectation placed on family literacy programs in regards to school readiness are not always reasonable or developmentally or culturally appropriate. In fact some of them are contrary to the very principles and best practices for family literacy programs.

“One of the major challenges with this focus on children’s readiness is that the social and cultural contexts in which children live are regarded as less important than the characteristics of individual children. This is despite research indicating that schools themselves make major contributions to children’s readiness, as well as what is known about the importance of community influences on learning (Dockett 2007).” (From *Working Paper for the Health Canada FLIPP Advisory Committee*, Nason, 2006).

Consequences of pressure to prepare children for academic demands of school

There is increasing pressure from schools systems to ensure that children are prepared for the academic demands of school. Consequences of this include:

- pressure for prior-to-school services to implement a stronger academic curriculum and become more “school-like”.
- pressure for families to prepare their children for school with specific experiences.
- deficit views of communities, families and children who do not provide or engage in these experiences.

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Impact of school literacy on home literacy

A study by Cairney & Ruge, (1998) documented the significant impact of school literacy on home literacy. The study revealed that specific types of literacy associated with schooling were prominent in home activities. This was often associated with homework, and with younger children, ‘playing school’. In contrast, home literacy practices did not have the same impact on school literacy programming.

However, there is evidence that families do have some influence on school practices. For example the New Brunswick Department of Education’s *Kids Comes First* initiative for improving pre-kindergarten school readiness and transitions into kindergarten is a result of families’ influence. This initiative was created in response to the school’s perception of families and their needs.

By allowing what goes on in the homes and communities of families to have the greater influence on program development (instead of what goes on in the schools), teachers and coordinators are insuring greater success and utility of their programs. It may still be the case that parents want what schools would typically teach in a more generic, prescriptive family literacy program. However, greater valuing of the program and curriculum is attained when the participants themselves generate and request these ideas as part of the curriculum (Auerbach, 1995b).

Children create a third space between home and school

Rachel Levy (2008) describes how five nursery-aged children created a third space between home and school, in order to find continuity between home and school constructions of reading. Children use various aspects of their home experiences such as popular culture television texts, computer technology and play, to integrate the reading experiences of the home with that of the primary school curriculum. She warns that many of these children's own sophisticated and valuable constructions could be at risk of disruption by the demands of school curriculum even from the time of entry into nursery school.

Partnerships and power imbalances

Because of the importance of continuity of literacy learning, collaborations need to take place at all levels of the system. The challenge lies in the development of partnerships that are truly collaborative and have the potential for equality. Given that the school system has a longer history and a more entrenched bureaucratic system than family literacy learning and support programs, how can we ensure that equal partnerships exist?

Equitable partnerships become more challenging when family literacy practitioners lack qualifications or credentials in early childhood or literacy education. Practitioners and the programs they run, become more vulnerable to the pressure to provide programs with school-like skills development activities which are culturally and developmentally inappropriate and contrary to recommendations for best practices.

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Influence of experience upon the early development of the brain

Brain researchers have demonstrated, at a cellular level, the influence of experience upon the *early development of the brain* (Johnson, 1996), and the existence of critical periods in this growth and development (Brierley, 1984). This brain research has been popularized and politicized in Canada by Mustard and McCain (1999) and McCain, Mustard and Shanker (2007) among others. In a movement that parallels 'Ready for School' initiatives in the USA, they have used it successfully as evidence of the need for a greater emphasis on early years education and care in Canada.

Although there is criticism that the lines of inference between brain research and educational intervention have been stretched too thin (see Bruer, *Education and brain research: a bridge too far*, 1999) the argument continues to be politically compelling and has given a much needed boost to funding for early and family literacy education. This is positive for the field, so long as politicians, practitioners and parents are able to resist attempting to 'educate the brain' as if there were no child attached to it!

“Best Practices” in Family Literacy Education

Canadian statements of best practices revolve around 11 broad themes (Purton and Gadsby 2002) which are statements about:

philosophy	cultural diversity	participant involvement
recruitment	access	supporting participants
assessment	community involvement	planning
administration	resources/funding	

Janet Shively has identified four principles of promising practices in Family Literacy (Shively 2006).

1. Family literacy programs reduce barriers to participation and retention.
2. Family literacy programs encourage community involvement, partnerships, support and referrals.
3. Family literacy programs engage in ongoing assessment, evaluation and documentation strategies.
4. Family literacy programs recruit, train, and retain high quality staff who can meet the diverse learning needs of participating family members.

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In *Live, Horse, 'til the grass Grows* (LCNB 2006) the following list of best practice statements for New Brunswick family literacy programs were presented:

Accessibility	Adequate resources	Supportive staff and environment
Universality	Flexibility	Socialization Opportunities
Participatory	Fun	

‘Best practices’ statements attempt to define quality by articulating the ideal. As the field of family literacy continues to grow and change, what is considered to be “best” practice in family literacy will also change.

Although they are not intended to be so, once established, these statements may be treated as though they are definitive. In order to avoid this misconception, other terms are now being substituted such as “good practices”, “promising practices” and “exemplary practices”. These alternate terms are meant to convey the idea that these statements should be seen as dynamic and needing to be redefined over time.

Staff qualifications and training

It is widely acknowledged that program quality is highly dependent on staff quality and along with the presence of appropriate personal qualities, that staff quality is related to training and credentials.

Other issues that arise for staffing and training have to do with the linguistic and cultural match between staff and families. There is no doubt that these, and the personal qualities of staff are vital to the success of family literacy programs. However, personal qualities are often upheld, while the opportunities for in depth education, training and staff development are lacking.

In spite of best practices statements, family literacy practitioners do not have professional status. Reasons for this may be the newness of the field, public perception of the nature of the work as primarily volunteer; and lack of a clear identity within the profession. Perspectives differ on this issue. Some practitioners fear that mandated training requirements will cause the field to become over regulated and its grass roots ties to the community will be lost. Others argue that requirements for staff qualifications will bring higher program quality, less staff turn-over, adequate wages and increased professional recognition.

The National Foundational Training Program (Center for Family Literacy Society of Alberta, 2002), offers “a solid general foundation that can be applied to a broad range of programs and contexts”. However, it involves just a few days of foundational training for what is actually an enormously complex and demanding job requiring very particular knowledge, skills and dispositions.

- 16 The need for training and professional development is a critical issue among family literacy practitioners. In addition to program-specific training, family literacy practitioners need training that addresses the wide range of skills and expertise required for effective program delivery. This includes the opportunity for reflection on practice that training encourages.

Position of family literacy work in adult education

While the concept of family literacy developed first in relation to children’s learning, the two-way effect has also been recognized. American researcher, Vivian Gadsden, suggests that more attention needs to be given to the impact of family literacy programs on the adults involved and the connections with family literacy work and adult education (Gadsden, 2002, 253).

The gap between ‘best practices’ and actual practices

The gap that exists between ‘best practices’ and actual practices, points to problems and issues in the field. For example, best practices call for trained and competent staff and adequate resources and funding to support trained and competent staff. However, neither adequate funding nor sufficient training programs are available.

“Best practices” in early literacy education

The IRA in conjunction with the NAEYC has issued a joint statement of *best practices* in literacy education for young children. These are widely acknowledged within the Early Childhood Literacy Community as incorporating key principles and solid, well researched practices.

Government response to research on the teaching of reading

In many countries, heated debates have taken place about what is considered to be the best method to teach reading to young children. These periods of intense public debate, known as “literacy crisis”, drive curriculum practice at a level far beyond the classroom and have a direct impact on government policy. This, in turn, has profound implications for the teaching of phonics. Researchers, Solar and Openshaw, (2007) and Hynds (2007), claim that governments with a centralized approach to educational policy have made controversial decisions on curriculum that have very dubious research backing and universal opposition. This has demanded that the government argue its case very persuasively using the readily available and politically-inspired techniques of spin doctoring. The authors call for an end to the government occupation of the classroom and the democratization of curriculum and assessment.

Building on real-life literacy activities to support literacy as part of the fabric of everyday life

A social-contextual or strength-based perspective toward family literacy has been advocated by experts in the field who suggest that family literacy programs must support literacy as part of the fabric of everyday life (Morrow & Paratore, 1993, p.196).

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Family literacy programs are urged to build upon the strengths, needs and goals of families and to incorporate real-life and meaningful literacy activities into their program. This is in contrast to program policies for adult and lifelong learning which focus on the development of skills and qualifications over the course of time. The goal of these programs is to equip parents with marketable skills that offer credentials for work-force entry and remuneration.

Program evaluation

There is a continuing need to document the impact of family literacy programs and initiatives. A challenge is created by on-going debate over methodology and differences in the perception of what defines success. Many family literacy programs are being pressured to show tangible outcomes. However, richly detailed qualitative analyses may ultimately provide the most tangible, personal and powerful means of demonstrating the effects of family literacy programming, as well as the processes and dynamics of instruction that may contribute to them (Wason-Ellam & Cronin, 2006).

POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION

- Family literacy refers to the literacy practices of parents, children and family members as they go about their daily lives and negotiate relationships both within the family and between the family and the broader community. This poses questions of “How do we create programs that recognize family literacy as social and cultural practice?” and “ How do we build a more collaborative approach to family literacy programming in New Brunswick?”.
 - The themes of empowerment/disempowerment and deficit/strength are prominent in the literature on family literacy. There is a need to create a more equitable balance between relationships involving families and schools as well as other institutions.
 - The degree of match between home and school contexts is a contributing factor in children’s success at school. The mismatch or lack of integration between school and home literacies combined with the dominance of school literacies is a major concern. It raises issues of social justice and begs the question as to “whose literacy counts?”
 - Use of deficit-based language in the public and the media is prevalent. It incorrectly portrays non-mainstream families as illiterate and lacking in literate culture and parenting skills. This view of families is in contrast to current research which identifies the homes of economically disadvantaged, undereducated families as having many rich literacy practices and supportive family values. Despite the growing concern about this deficit terminology, its usage continues and so does its damaging effects on family literacy learning.
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- Studies of the literacy practices in families have resulted in a redefinition of family literacy as “social practice”. Current research demonstrates the effectiveness of using real-life meaningful literacy activities for family literacy education and support. Despite these findings, many programs continue to base their program on outdated notions of families and of literacy. A growing body of research suggests that despite their good intentions, programs may be inadvertently undermining the very families they attempt to help. (Casper, June 2003).
 - There are many possible explanations for the gap between research and practice in family literacy. First of all, the research may not be effectively disseminated and understood by those who implement programs. Practitioners and those from different levels of the system need opportunities to read the research and engage in dialogue and reflection, bringing their own experience and knowledge to the discussion.
 - Although guiding principles for programs have been articulated, putting principles into practice is more complicated and takes significant effort and insight. Practitioners require high quality on-going professional development and training opportunities to support their practice. In addition, more practitioners need opportunities to participate in *research in practice*. This will help to close the gap between the research and practice and contribute to the growing body of knowledge on family literacy.

- Intensive programs involving both children and parents over a period of time produce the most measurable positive outcomes. The research also indicates that not enough of these programs are available to families in New Brunswick. A study on family literacy released by the Literacy Coalition (Perry, 2006), reported that as few as four such programs existed in the province, and even these are currently threatened by funding instability.
- The role of government is to articulate the broad based goals and ambitions of literacy policies insuring that they reflect both economic and social considerations. Program practice and curriculum ought to be based on sound principles and pedagogy informed by current research and developed in discussion with those involved in program delivery at all levels of the system.
- Collaborative relationships and connections are necessary to ensure continuity of learning experiences for children. The challenge is to create connections that are truly collaborative and equitable.

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