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Family literacy education— Panacea or false promise?

Some perceived shortcomings
of current family literacy program
models are described
by the author.

Family literacy is an educational and public policy effort to join early childhood and adult literacy education. The basic premise of the family literacy approach is that “Parents are the first teachers their children have, and they are the teachers that children have for the longest time” (Morrow, 1995, p. 6). Research has shown a linkage between home environment and the acquisition of school-based literacies; some homes are characterized by literate practices that closely match those literacies valued at school, while other homes are rich in literacies, but not necessarily those that are academically prized (Au, 1998; Auerbach, 1995a; Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1997). One goal of family literacy education is to deal with the mismatch of home and school literacies, by integrating early childhood literacy, adult literacy/ESL, and parent-child interaction instruction (Gadsden, 1994; Morrow, 1995; Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995; Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995).

For these and other reasons, family literacy has been increasingly propelled into the educational and political spotlight. Indeed, “a sense of national urgency” surrounds current policy and research on family literacy education (Gadsden, 1994, p. 60). This sense of urgency can be seen as part of a larger “cultural struggle going on within the field of education,” where family literacy is one of the “arenas in which [this struggle] is being played out” (Fandel, 1997, p. 206). This cultural struggle is not only about literacy, but also about family values, gender, and poverty, as well as race, ethnicity,

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(pp. 338-346)

language, and class differences. Indeed, as a site of increasing public and media scrutiny, federal funding, and professional research activity, family literacy education is a useful collection point from which to air larger concerns about literacy, education, and families. While it must be admitted that family literacy education does hold great potential for effectively combining adult and early childhood literacy, as well as for developing helpful school-community relationships and valuable family-centered programs, the failings of the family literacy model need to be critically examined in terms of these larger cultural struggles to ensure that we do not offer false promises we can never deliver.

Family literacy education in the United States

The relative emphasis on child and adult components in family literacy programs across the U.S. is quite variable, and generalizations tend toward caricatures more than descriptions. According to a recent study of programs, although "widely endorsed by policy makers and educators, the field of family literacy is struggling to define its goals and practices. A single description of family literacy is not possible" because local programs often adapt goals and services to the population served (DeBruin-Parecki, Paris, & Siedenburtg, 1997, p. 596). Indeed, as Auerbach (1995a) reports, "family literacy has become a new 'buzzword' in the last 10 years" (p. 12), and has garnered support from the federal government, as well as from private foundations, such as the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, the National Center for Family Literacy/Kenan Trust, and the Coors Family Literacy Foundation. Fueled by both greater awareness of emergent literacy and high-profile national campaigns spearheaded by former first lady Barbara Bush, family literacy has given rise to other early childhood/school readiness and parent involvement programs (Morrow et al., 1995).

President Clinton's promotion of the America Reads Challenge marks a significant federal intervention into the field of early literacy and follows a trend started by the Even Start Family Literacy program (begun in 1990 by an earlier administration), and the federal Head Start Family Service Centers (also begun in 1990). In addition to these national early childhood/family literacy programs, many lo-

cal parent involvement programs have been developed. Parent involvement programs, often built from local needs and through collaborative work, are designed to assist parents with materials and methods for bolstering their children's literacy development (see Morrow et al., 1995, pp. 17-47). Key examples of parent involvement programs include the Arkansas Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPPY), initiated by then first lady of Arkansas Hillary Rodham Clinton in 1986; the Pajaro Valley (California) School District's Bilingual Program, also begun in 1986; and the St. Louis, Missouri, Parents as Teachers (PAT) program, founded in 1981.

As suggested by these examples, family literacy does have great potential for bringing together different areas of literacy education. Many family programs are especially effective at bridging the divides between adult and early childhood literacy. Many programs are also respectful of learners' home cultures, languages, styles of learning, and styles of parenting (see Auerbach & Associates, 1996; Moneyhun, 1996; Morrow et al., 1995; Shanahan et al., 1995). Such respect for and inclusion of home cultures is especially important for many immigrant and non-English-speaking families, as well as other families of "diverse background" involved in family literacy programs (Au 1998; see also Gadsden, 1994; Moneyhun, 1996; Shanahan et al., 1995; Taylor, 1997). However, there are a number of problems with the dominant family literacy model as a core around which to build viable and inclusive literacy programs, and upon which to base a socially useful literacy dialogue—either locally or nationally. According to Gadsden (1994), "Despite the appeal of these [family literacy] efforts, the mechanisms to ensure their success are only partially developed" and—most important—the effects of such programs "on the families they are intended to serve is relatively unknown" (p. 60). The next section examines various developments and effects of family literacy efforts.

Failings of the family literacy model

Family literacy as an educational movement was launched more by commonsense beliefs about language, literacy, and generational transmission of schooling-appropriate reading and writing skills than by thorough research, planning, or practice-

based consideration (Auerbach, 1995a; Taylor, 1997). St. Pierre, who headed the team that undertook the first major program evaluation of the federal Even Start Family Literacy program (St. Pierre et al., 1995), recently pointed out that "in the absence of much research on the effectiveness of such a comprehensive and coordinated approach, two-generation programs have proliferated at the local, state, and federal levels" (St. Pierre, Layzer, & Barnes, 1998, p. 101).

Though the body of family literacy research is now expanding rapidly, a close reading of this research indicates several additional concerns that make this model of education more likely to further fragment than to unite the field of literacy. Briefly, these concerns fall into four categories: (a) too often family literacy education is conceived and implemented as a compensatory model; (b) family literacy education targets only one child and one parent, generally a preschooler and his or her mother; (c) family literacy education does not effectively integrate adult education, literacy/ESL, or parent-child interaction time into programming; and (d) funding from grants does not provide a stable base on which to build lasting coalitions around literacy. Each of these concerns will be taken up separately.

The compensatory model

According to the compensatory model, family literacy education is designed and implemented to make up for some lack within a family, and especially within the parents as the first teacher of their children (Auerbach, 1989, 1995a, 1995b; Gadsden, 1994; Taylor, 1997; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). In addition to overcoming educational shortcomings, claims for this model of family literacy include compensation for lack of English language fluency, for lack of stable employment and adequate income (Shannon, 1998; St. Pierre et al., 1998), for lack of adequate parent-child interactions, and for lack of "correct" family morals (Taylor, 1997). In short, the family literacy education model claims to ameliorate all of these problems—but only for the specific families who are eligible or willing to participate in the program. A limitation of the compensatory view is that it singles out particular families as "in need" of specific kinds of help, and within these families, further

selects specific individuals (generally a young child and mother). Then, the educational system carries out "treatment" on the family members (Morrow & Young, 1997, p. 736). This critique does not deny that some families do in fact desire and gain from such "compensatory" intervention (Auerbach, 1995a; Moneyhun, 1996). However, the exchange value of what is gained for a select few must be weighed against the cultural costs for these few, as well as for families who are neither willing nor able to squeeze their learning and life patterns into narrow, ethnocentric, and bourgeois models of education (and indeed of family).

Devine suggested that Graff's study of literacy in 19th-century Canada (1979)—where he found that for ethnic minorities and working class individuals, literacy primarily "functioned to inculcate prescribed middle-class values and to reinforce forms of social control"—might yield much the same findings today for these and other "muted" social groups (1994, p. 227). Pruyin likewise framed his study (1999) of an adult literacy project by arguing that schools, "as one of the many cultural tools of the bourgeoisie, can serve to cement the existing economic/social order in place by presenting these cultural practices as 'natural' and 'normal'" (p. 17). Alternative practices of literacy, language, learning, and family, marked by complex differences of class, race, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, and location are identified (though perhaps not overtly), silenced, and then erased under compensatory models of family literacy education.

Yaffe and Williams (1998), in fact, reported an identify-and-erase view of family and cultural difference in their study of "why women chose to participate in a family literacy program." When the adult students (African American women) failed to interact with their children during PACT (Parents and Children Together) time, the (Caucasian) Family Advocate assumed that the women did not recognize the importance of PACT due to cultural differences:

that's the women's culture...they didn't understand the concept of working/playing with kids to give them self-esteem. Praising kids was not heard of before; making kids behave was the mother's goal... We had to get very specific and say, "Read this book to your kid." Also, we learned that it

worked better to send one parent at a time. (Yaffe & Williams, 1998, p. 16)

Yaffe and Williams, to their credit, followed this statement by cautioning that we should be wary of educational models that “simply transmit our own cultural practices” to the homes of participants, and urge family literacy providers “to examine the interactional patterns that exist within families and build on those patterns” (1998, p. 17). However, even their carefully wrought analysis fell into a deficit or transmission model of literacy at the end, where they place the primary burden back on parents: “For family literacy programs to be most effective, *parents need to understand* two essential principles of family literacy development” (Yaffe & Williams, 1998, p. 18, emphasis added). Why must the burden be placed upon parents? Why is the imperative not “Literacy teachers need to understand and then interact with families in culturally appropriate ways to promote multiple literacies and multiple ways of being that family members can use in their communities”? Though no doubt well intentioned, this rhetoric of parental “need” sounds disturbingly like that with which the National Center for Family Literacy opened the decade of the 1990s: “[Family literacy] means changing attitudes, values, and in some cases cultures” (NCFL, 1991, p. 7).

As suggested by the Family Advocate’s comment, “it worked better to send one parent at a time” (Yaffe & Williams, 1998, p. 16), another limitation of the compensatory perspective is its isolationist methodology. This method does not seek out other family members (other than one child, one mother) or alternative family groups likely to benefit from *collective* family or community work on literacy. Instead, the compensatory model segregates “needy” families and individuals from the rest (much as children classified as “learning disabled” have been pulled from their public school classrooms). Luttrell (1996, p. 347) further argued that this maternalistic, caretaking approach, with “the focus on individual mothers” who are supposed to learn how to “facilitate their children’s successful development, draws attention away from the responsibility of institutions or collective entities such as communities, schools, and the state to provide for the basic educational needs and well being of its citizens.” Or, as Auerbach de-

clared, once again “*mothers are to blame* (this time for the problems of the nation)!” (1995a, p. 651, emphasis in original). Though “the struggles of the underprepared [may be] revealing the needs of the many,” as Rose (1990, p. 202) claimed, this model of education keeps the struggling and the many at great remove: Family literacy education is for special families and individual family members “at risk” by someone else’s standard; other families should remain distant from the first “at risk” group. In contrast to isolated classrooms or individualized teaching, “households never function alone or in isolation; they are always connected to other households and institutions through diverse social networks” (La Colectiva Intercambio, 1996, p. 108).

The one child, one mother model

Though not necessarily designed or promoted as “one child, one mother,” this is—in practice—the most common family literacy model. Family literacy programs seldom include adolescent siblings or other adults. Though some local, grass-roots literacy programs do strive to include extended family groups, and also build close ties with local schools and community groups (Davidson & Koppenhaver, 1993; DeBruin-Parecki et al., 1997; Rutledge, Swirpel, & Tracy, 1996; Shanahan et al., 1995), the dominant four-part schema that the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) has propagated overlooks older siblings, including adolescents struggling with school and life literacies (Enz & Searfoss, 1996), as well as other adults. Indeed, Gadsden reported (1994, p. 66) that rarely “do programs expand to include more than two members within a single family (typically a parent and a young child) around a set of teaching and learning practices.”

Instead, family literacy models target 3- and 4-year-old children and their mothers. While the federal Even Start Family Literacy model allows a range from birth to age 8 in educational programming, youngest siblings often attend onsite day-care during the day, while older siblings attend regular public schools (St. Pierre et al., 1998). In contrast to this model, Enz and Searfoss (1996) proposed that younger learners and adolescents would both benefit from participation in literacy programs, and we should expand our views (and programs) of family literacy accordingly. They

suggest that work with adolescents may be especially critical for the future, as many of these students will soon be parents. A "major strength" of their "Buddy Reading" program is that "it has the potential to simultaneously improve older students' skills while supporting young students as they learn to read" (Enz & Searfoss, 1996, p. 578).

In addition to broadening the concept of "family" within family literacy education, program staff need to venture outside of educational sites and work with whole families and whole communities, perhaps through social events such as program

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book-publishing parties or with community guest speakers and teachers (Schaafsma, 1993; see also Shanahan et al., 1995). DeBruin-Parecki et al. (1997) also urged staff to "collaborate and gain knowledge beyond academe, becoming invested in and enlightened about the populations they serve" (p. 604). Finally, concerning literacy research, Gadsden (1994) has argued that we "need to focus on the entire family—mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, other adults, and children who are considered integral to the family structure. The participation of fathers and other adult family members in children's literacy development is conspicuously limited in literature from research and practice" (1994, p. 80). If research and practice begin to look closely at the complexity of families, in all their myriad configurations, and if literacy programs invite many families, many family members, and many literacies, then family literacy could begin to unite the field of literacy around the concept of literacy as human right (Taylor, 1997).

The lack of adequate adult or interactive literacy practice

St. Pierre et al. (1998) pointed out that although the emergent literacy and early childhood compo-

nents of the family literacy model can claim a substantial research base, "no consensus exists on what constitutes a high-quality parenting or adult education/job training program" as part of family literacy (p. 120). Furthermore, they concluded, both research and their own observations of two-generation education sites suggest "that most adult education programs tend to replicate the poor high school settings in which participating adults initially failed" (1998, p. 120). This approach, they said, is "doomed to failure," and better approaches need to be developed "if we are serious" about successful, high-quality two-generation literacy programs (1998, p. 120). Moreover, if a primary goal of two-generation programs is to "allow families to escape the cycle of poverty" (NCFL, 1996, p. 1), this goal is too seldom being met. As Auerbach (1995a) observed, the argument that literacy training alone, no matter how high the quality, will lead to employment "disregards macro economic factors like recession and unemployment patterns, social factors like job discrimination, as well as the actual dynamics of hiring and job retention," and also ignores race and gender and immigration status as determining forces (1995a, p. 650). Indeed St. Pierre et al. (1998) concluded from their evaluation of current two-generation education programs that there is "no evidence to suggest that the two-generation approach...can move substantial numbers of families from the welfare rolls" (1998, p. 121).

In addition to a lack of adequate adult education or job skills and search assistance that would be beneficial in the long term, many family literacy programs sell short the element that should claim center place: adult-child interactive time, or PACT. This omission is especially troubling considering that an expressed goal of many family literacy programs is to increase parent and child colearning exchanges, which may be especially important in cases where the children and adults are beginning ESL learners or beginning readers.

In describing a typical four-component (NCFL-style) family literacy program in Elgin, Illinois, Benita Somerfield of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy presented an outline of each week's activities. Parents received 10 hours of ESL instruction; their children likewise received 10 hours of instruction. In contrast, only 1 hour per week was dedicated to parent-child time, to

parent support time, and to special events (Somerfield, 1995, p. 194). In keeping children and adults separate most of the time, this model not only replicates the graded divisions of traditional schooling, but also the greater divide between adult work and child play. DeBruin-Parecki et al. (1997) concluded from their study of family literacy programs in Michigan that "greater integration of emergent literacy and adult literacy is needed to make practices interactive and intergenerational" (p. 604).

The instability of family literacy funding

Though funding for public school and college-based literacy education is subject to cutbacks, as well as to in-house struggles with disciplines deemed more critical to state or local interests (business, engineering, computer science), the radical instability of the funding base for family literacy education is a strike against this model as a viable future for the field of literacy. In large part because of the "compensatory" status of family literacy (as well as the relative economic or social status of families who participate in such programs), these are often seen as adjunct or extra programs. In many ways, family literacy education today seems similar to bilingual literacy education when it began in the late 1960s. Both programs had their start as compensatory models, and both function parallel to, and not integrated with, mainstream literacy education. For example, though many family literacy programs are housed in current or former elementary school buildings, there is little systematic exchange of curricular or instructional information between school district teachers or administrators, and the literacy program teachers and learners (Moneyhun, 1996; Quigley, 1997).

Reyes (1992) traces the trajectory of this parallel structure, which "began at the federal level and filtered down to local school districts, where bilingual programs were viewed as 'adjunct' to core programs" (1992, p. 172). Higher level local administrators (and legislators) are thus willing to rely on outside federal, foundation, or corporate sources for continued support, rather than to develop infrastructure for more stable and enduring local support. As we recognize the similar histories of these two literacy models, California's June,

1998, repeal of bilingual education in the public schools—in the state with 40% of the nation's limited-English population—gains even greater significance. Where will family literacy education be in 30 years? Will already marginalized family literacy educators and researchers be more able or more willing than bilingual education advocates to engage in collective organizing to influence popular media, popular myths, and governmental policy?

Family literacy programs should support communities

For all of the reasons given, family literacy is likely to continue as a poorer relation to mainstream public school literacy education. In contrast, locally funded or workplace adult literacy programs can at least focus narrowly on workforce preparation and basic skills, without bothering about the child's play of emergent literacy—or the claims for transformative empowerment of families. Though it seems on the surface to be an area of promise and hope, family literacy education as currently configured and practiced will not likely heal the fractures within the field of literacy education, nor will these programs produce sweeping national social or economic changes of the kind suggested by the National Center for Family Literacy. On the other hand, however, family literacy will continue to play a popular role in the media, in policy debates on welfare reform, and in the educational community. Indeed, Shannon (1998) reported that U.S. reading education since the 1960s has been "charged with ameliorating the cause of poverty" and eventually "eradicating poverty" (p. 24). Family literacy, along with America Reads, is simply a more recent incarnation of this effort to "break the cycles of illiteracy and poverty" (NCFL, 1989, p. 2). Linked specifically to education, as Auerbach suggested, "Family literacy is being touted as a new solution to the problems of schooling. Who would argue against helping parents help their children acquire literacy?" (1995b, p. 12).

Indeed, who would argue? On the other hand, we should all be concerned about the models and methods of "help" currently being promoted, and concerned as well about who promotes these models and where in the social, economic, and policy chains of community the various stakeholders in

the debate have positioned themselves. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988, p. 194) pointed out that parents and children need not only educational and life opportunities, but also opportunities to engage in research that shapes the social policies that affect their lives in the long term. What would family literacy education look like with such a research-practice paradigm in place?

First, we would acknowledge that "the voices of the [family literacy] participants themselves have largely been absent in any discussions of program development, quality, or evaluation" (Neuman, Caperelli, & Kee, 1998, p. 224; though see Auerbach & Associates, 1996 for a counterexample). More broadly, in order to "understand families as contexts for human development, we need to consider not only how family members interact with one another in their daily activities, but also the social and structural systems that surround the families, including institutional systems such as workplaces and schools" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994, p. 144). Attending to these multiple family voices in turn means that literacy researchers and practitioners *need to learn* "how to translate and make accessible to [other] practitioners and policymakers what is known about culture, ethnicity, race, and gender" in order to develop instructional materials and programs for different populations and configurations of families—a goal that presumes a literacy workforce including members from the cultural and ethnic groups of program participants (Gadsden, 1994, p. 73).

Second, family literacy is "not changing people," but is rather a means of "offering choices and opportunities to families" (Neuman et al., 1998, p. 224). But who is offering the choices in this equation? Does not "offering" assume a higher, or socially ratified, position of power? In contrast, socially responsible and family-responsive literacy programs should be *learning*-centered (as opposed to *learner*-centered, where students are the learners and teachers the transmitters of normative knowledge and culture). As such, we might well amend the offering of choices and opportunities to include literacy teachers, most of whom are women, nearly all underpaid, and none of whom have much social power in the new work order. Indeed, Luttrell (1996) calls for a feminist literacy practice that puts women's lives and concerns at the center of curricular change in

adult literacy programs: "This means focusing on issues about violence against women, women's health needs and body image, and women's needs for childcare and transportation, and organizing instruction in ways that do not isolate women further from each other" (1996, p. 359). Certainly this would be a "risky" move, as Luttrell admits, but it just might open up possibilities for long-term changes surrounding women's power and access in literacy education and in society generally.

Finally, we might need to imagine and develop family literacy programs that we are willing to give away. This strategy means that planners of literacy programs acknowledge their funding is not secure over the long-term—especially likely as learning- and participant-centered curricula geared toward social change become central to the pedagogical mission of a literacy program. More important, this goal means that we reach out into local communities and connect with families so that they assume ownership of the literacy program. As an example, we might imagine a pattern similar to the formation of Citizenship schools in the 1950s (see Horton & Freire, 1990, pp. 67–74), but we can also look to more recent community-focused programs.

Auerbach and Associates (1996) outlined three collaborative adult literacy programs that developed primarily from the community members who participated in and guided instruction, assessment, and long-term planning. Likewise, Shanahan et al. (1995) reported that Project FLAME, a family literacy program in Chicago's Latino/a neighborhoods, continued after the original funding ended. A "Parents as Trainers" component was developed in collaboration with parents, so that participants could teach their neighbors what they had learned during their time in the literacy program. Fifteen parents participated, developed their own lesson plans, and then taught Parents as Teachers seminars to neighbors, with instructional materials and teaching stipends paid for by Project FLAME. The principal of a participating school developed a follow-up program, so that parents could get additional training and help in the school's classrooms. Finally, one of the participating mothers "moved to another school and established a program in her children's new school" (Shanahan et al. 1995, p. 592).

Rather than rely on a relatively homogenous and homeostatic model that can be packaged and shipped all across the U.S. (or indeed the world), family literacy educators need to attend to the ever-present and ever-shifting richness, complexity, and diversity in people's lives. Indeed, "given the growing interest in family literacy and its current high profile, the time is ripe for critical self-reflection about family literacy" (Neuman et al., 1998, p. 251). As we begin this act of self-reflection we might keep these words in mind: "As valuable as family literacy programs are, their real strength must be in their ability to foster autonomy, and self-reliance within families, schools, and communities" (Shanahan et al., 1995, p. 592). And keep these words in mind as well: "Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift" (Freire, 1970, p. 31). Family literacy need not remain a one-way offering of choice or opportunity, but could become a coconstruction of choices, options, lives, and possible futures—for adults, children, siblings, teachers, families, and communities.

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