REFINING FAMILY LITERACY PRACTICE:
A NEW ZEALAND CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Following the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1996, there has been an upsurge of interest in adult literacy in New Zealand. This interest is reflected in a national adult literacy strategy with foundation learning as one of the government's six priorities for the postschool sector. One result of this policy change has been a move to diversify adult literacy provision. This article reviews the development of a family literacy program in an area of high need and discusses a number of issues that have arisen in the program's development based on a series of formative and process evaluations.

As in most Western countries, literacy provision for adults in New Zealand has been a marginal component of the education system (Benseman, 2005). Adult literacy provision has been dominated by three main streams: community-based programs under the umbrella of Literacy Aotearoa; programs for unemployed persons run by polytechnic schools and private training establishments; and workplace programs, many of which are linked to Workbase, the National Centre for Workplace Literacy and Language.

In 1996, the IALS showed a degree of need in New Zealand broadly comparable to the United States, Australia, and Canada (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1997). With the paucity of research on adult literacy in New Zealand (Benseman, 2003a), the IALS proved to be a seminal piece of research. It sparked considerable public debate, culminating in the first national adult literacy policy document, *More Than Words* (2001), and in foundation skills being identified as one of the six priorities of the government's *Tertiary Education Strategy* (Ministry of Education, 2002). Since the release of these key documents there has been a strong move to

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diversify both the number and types of delivery strategies in order to increase learning opportunities for adults with literacy needs in New Zealand.

Although there is now a large body of evaluative research internationally about family literacy (Brooks, 1998; St. Pierre, Ricciuti, Tao, & Creps, 2001; Wasik, 2001), it is dominated by the measurement of learning outcomes, largely in keeping with the demands of program funders. There is, however, a surprising lack of evaluation of programs and issues that arise during their development and functioning.

This article therefore describes the development of a new form of provision and the issues that have arisen in a family literacy program in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city. Although these findings are based on a program situated in a small Pacific nation, they are relevant to readers in a number of other contexts. First, the program, Manukau Family Literacy Project (MFLP), was originally developed from the American Kenan model of family literacy, which in turn was derived from the Kentucky Parent and Child Education (PACE) program. This model includes four elements: (a) adult education; (b) parent education; (c) early childhood education; and (d) activities for parents and children together (PACT). Second, as the IALS has shown, the level of literacy need for New Zealand adults is similar to that of adults in the United States. Third, the author's personal experience in a number of countries, such as Ireland, England, and the United States, has shown considerable congruence with both the program format and related issues.

Methodology

The article draws on the findings of two formative and process evaluation research reports carried out by the author (Benseman, 2002, 2003b, 2004) and available at www.comet.org.nz/. The data for all of the evaluations were gathered from a range of sources. These included project records, school records, meeting minutes, observation of learners, and interviews with 15 elementary and early childhood teachers, as well as personnel associated with the project such as

social workers and funders. But the main source of information was an extensive series of interviews with 37 adult project participants (both before and after the program), two adult education teachers, and two program administrators. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. A summative evaluation (Benseman & Sutton, 2005) also detailed the impact on both the adult participants and the children who participated with them.

Origins of the MFLP

Although there has been occasional interest shown in family literacy programs in New Zealand over the past decade, the most substantive program to date has been pioneered by the City of Manukau Education Trust (COMET). COMET is a not-for-profit organization set up by the Manukau City Council (one of four political authorities making up the greater Auckland region) to support and stimulate educational opportunities in a city widely recognized as having a population with the highest educational and social needs in the country. At the beginning of 2002, COMET identified family literacy as a potential area of development to complement its other educational work in the city. In September of that year, COMET ran a seminar with Bonnie Lash Freeman from the U.S. National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), who served as a key resource person to explore this option.

Funding was then successfully sought from the New Zealand Ministry of Education, a program coordinator appointed, an advisory committee established, two pilot sites selected, and a formative and process evaluation started. A third site was added in 2004 and a fourth in 2005. The two pilot sites ran their programs throughout 2003 and 2004; the author's evaluation reports (Benseman, 2002, 2003b, 2004) of the piloting phase form the basis for this article.

Each MFLP site involves three partner institutions: an early childhood center, an elementary school (both of which supply child participants for the program), and a tertiary provider. At one site the tertiary provider is a university while at the other site it is a polytechnic school. The tertiary providers deliver the adult education component of the program. The early childhood centers and the elementary

schools work with the child participants enrolled in the program and link with the adult components for key parts of the program such as PACT. The tertiary providers employ the adult educator, who is responsible for teaching the adult participants, as well as having some involvement in other components of the program. Both MFLP programs are located in classrooms on elementary school premises.

The MFLP was planned on the basis of a conventional model of family literacy (Wasik & Herrmann, 2004, p. 15). After several years of operations, some distinctive features started to emerge, but in essence the MFLP still follows this model.

In brief, the adult participants attend approximately 30 hours of teaching per week, during which they undertake a range of courses in adult education (such as computing, math, reading) and parenting education (including child development). Unlike most U.S. programs, the MFLP has restricted the number of child participants to one per adult. Each parent is permitted to select one child to participate in the program, in a process called nomination. The nominated children attend either a partner school or early childhood center; the adult participants and their nominated children have PACT time for approximately 20 minutes per day, four times a week.

The parents' curriculum was based on several sources. One program used a pre-entry program for a certificate in early childhood education and the other used a tailor-made course based on a developmental education program. Both programs contain strong basic skills components, child development studies, and parenting skills. While the child participants follow conventional programs in early childhood centers or elementary schools, they do meet with their parents during PACT time for topics and activities planned jointly by the family literacy teacher and staff from the elementary school and early childhood centers.

Over the eight months of the evaluations, the two sites ran programs for 37 parents and their nominated children. Table 1 gives a brief description of their characteristics. The learner characteristics are significant for their high representation of social groups that have been historically underrepresented in New Zealand tertiary education (Benseman, 1996).

Table 1

Summary Data about MFLP Participants

	Bairds Otara Site Intake 1	Bairds Otara Site Intake 2	Rowandale Site	MFLP total
Adults/children enrolled	11/11	12/12	14/14	37/37
No. withdrawn	1	3	3	7
% attendance[a]	92	82	90	88
Men	1	2	1	4
Maori[b]	7	5	1	13
Pacific Islander	4	7	11	22
European	-	-	2	2

[a] Does not include attendance data from those who withdrew.

[b] Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand and make up approximately 13% of the population; Pacific Islanders make up approximately 8%.

Review of Family Literacy Research

In the first phase of the project, a review of the extensive research literature evaluating family literacy programs was undertaken (Benseman, 2002; Padak, Sapin, & Baycich, 2002). This review found the following elements to be key features of successful family literacy programs:

1. Intensity: Improved outcomes were associated with increased intensity of instruction.

2. Staffing: Staff should be composed of persons with expertise in adult education, early childhood education, elementary education, community education, social work, and educational administration.

3. Curriculum: Programs should be built on participants' strengths, using their knowledge, experiences, and interests to shape the curriculum, integrating curriculum throughout the program, and ensuring positive learning environments.

4. Teaching practices: The programs need to recognize the adult component of the learners' needs, from the provision of appropriate adult facilities, through to teaching based on sound adult learning principles.

5. Collaboration: Family literacy requires coordinated collaboration with a wide range of agencies, including schools, tertiary providers, other educational groups, special education agencies, libraries, employment agencies, welfare groups, and health agencies.

These review findings were evaluated in the project's initial planning processes and incorporated by project staff into the program wherever possible. They proved to be an invaluable source of insight initially, although results from the project's own formative and process evaluations later supplanted the review findings.

Issues Arising to Date

Evaluations of the MFLP have documented a number of issues that have arisen to date. While some issues are common to any pilot program, others are unique to family literacy. The first three issues discussed below relate to collaboration, a factor that researchers (Padak et al., 2002) have shown to be an important factor in U.S. family literacy programs.

Working across Conventional Educational Boundaries

Family literacy undoubtedly breaks the mold in that it works across age groups, whereas in New Zealand, like many countries, the education system is highly stratified by age. This difference generates challenges in various ways. First, it requires early childhood, school, and adult educators to work together in ways that few have done previously. It requires them to understand each other's terminology, ways of working, bureaucratic structures, and philosophies. While this demand has not led to any real conflicts or misunderstandings, it has taken time for each of the parties to get to know each other and work things through. Collaboration among the various stakeholders is certainly a strength of family literacy, but requires conscious effort to establish and maintain.

Second, unlike funding sources in many countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, New Zealand funding sources are not always appropriate for family literacy. Because of the mixture of ages, no one agency or funding source can cover all of the program needs. This necessitates some degree of shopping around for different funding sources.

Ownership of the Program

Because there are a number of institutions participating in the overall program and at each site, there have been some occasions where it is not altogether clear who "owns" the program and therefore who has the final say in making some decisions. This issue has also been identified in U.S. family literacy programs (Alamprese & Tao, 2001).

This issue is most obvious in relation to the tertiary providers who enroll participants in their institutions' courses, recruit and pay the adult educator, and take responsibility for program administration. Yet all of this occurs under the umbrella of the MFLP project. This relationship has been clarified in part by COMET negotiating memoranda of understanding to define roles and responsibilities with participating providers, but there is still an ongoing need to refine these relationships within the project. This issue has been explored further in another paper by project staff (Vester, Benseman, & Houlker, 2003).

Several teachers in the participating schools reported that they felt a need for all the teachers across the partner institutions to let each other know about their long-term plans (especially in relation to curriculum planning) in order to enable better coordination of their programs and take advantage of key events such as cultural festivals.

Program Aims

Because family literacy involves a wide range of stakeholders, it is inevitable that each group comes into the program with a similarly diverse array of agendas and aims. While it is a strength of family literacy that programs can achieve a range of different impacts, it is also

true that this diversity of interests and expectations can result in tensions within the project. Probably the most important strategy in this respect is to constantly clarify and specify what each stakeholder's aims are for the program so that the overall agenda is on the table for all to see and debate. The identification of program aims will vary from site to site according to the needs and interests of the various organizations involved, but needs to be made explicit early on and revised throughout the planning process.

Recruiting Staff

As the research literature shows (see, for example, DeBruin-Parecki, Paris, & Siedenburg, 1997; Padak et al., 2002), effective programs require multiskilled, well-trained staff. Because there is no precedent to the MFLP in the area, recruiting staff members who can satisfy the multiple demands of family literacy has not been easy. This challenge has not been helped by the fact that employment has been on a short-term basis, which is not especially attractive for experienced practitioners. The problem only concerns the adult educator (who is the only "new" appointment in the program), as the schools and early childhood centers are usually able to tap into their normal staffing sources for any additional appointments.

Recruiting Participants

A short lead-in time for recruitment did not make the initial process of participant selection easy—especially for a program that has no precedents in the area. Staff in the participating institutions agreed to approach potential participants initially and undertake the distribution of a printed brochure. U.S. experience has been that shoulder-tapping is important early on (Padak, Sapin, & Baycich, 2002), although less so in the United Kingdom (Brooks et al., 1996), where publicity letters were identified as the most common recruitment strategy.

Trying to recruit participants in the period preceding Christmas and then over the following holiday period was certainly not ideal, but was necessitated by other procedural constraints. Recruitment for the second intake of participants at the midyear point was easier than the first intake and international experience also points to recruitment becoming easier once programs gather momentum.

The question arose whether MFLP had been able to recruit the most appropriate adult participants to the program. The first intakes for both sites included some people (approximately a quarter of the total group) who had quite reasonable levels of literacy skills and who probably did not meet the original intentions of the program. Subsequent experience has shown, however, that this situation was probably to be expected, where the first intake is often an atypical group compared with subsequent intakes. Conversely, it needs to be noted that several adults with high literacy needs were not accepted into one program because it was judged that they would not be able to cope with the literacy demands of the courses. These applicants were referred to alternative programs, but the fact that they could not be included does raise some challenging questions about the present program.

It is interesting to note that even adults with reasonable literacy skills were challenged considerably by other elements of the program. In some cases, there was clearly an impact in terms of parenting issues and in other cases, on the nominated child. Overall, therefore, MFLP has been successful in recruiting a group of adults with high needs, although these needs have not always been in terms of literacy skills.

Participants' Personal Crises

Throughout this pilot project, one of the distinguishing features has been the intrusive nature of the crises in some of the participants' daily lives—a finding also reported in the United States (Seaman, 1992). The crises have included physical assault, custody issues, accommodation problems, major health trauma, police-related incidents, benefit difficulties, and family disputes. Poverty has also been a recurring theme. Talking about her home situation, one participant whose husband had recently been charged with the illegal manufacture of methamphetamine said, "We live in an unsafe environment. We're being harassed by police and the neighbors, we've been robbed five times, the front fence crashed into three times, so I've put my kids with my mother."

This situation is certainly not true of all the participants, but a significant number have had personal issues and crises that have resulted in ongoing absences, difficulties completing course requirements, and withdrawal from the program. In many cases, the crises have not directly concerned the learners themselves, but people (almost always family members) for whom they have responsibility. These various crises have placed considerable pressure on the project staff and especially the adult educators. These adult educators have demonstrated real commitment to the program by their efforts to help resolve the issues, which are well beyond the normal expectations of staff roles. Nonetheless, they see these demands as part and parcel of family literacy work, and as one adult educator said, "I would not expect it to be any other way."

While these crises are an indicator that MFLP is indeed recruiting appropriate people for the program, the crises still require considerable energy and time from project staff that could otherwise be spent on educational activities. However, it is interesting to note that one adult educator commented she did not mind spending the extra time. This teacher said that her involvement in working crises through with her students — often in association with social service agencies — was integral to her credibility with students and an important reason behind the overall impact of the program.

Appropriateness of Adult Education Courses

The author's second evaluation report (Benseman, 2003b) raised the question of the appropriateness of the two set curriculum courses chosen for the adult education component of MFLP, as opposed to an open curriculum, needs-driven course as is the norm in many adult literacy programs. The two courses used for the MFLP included a foundation course at the Bairds Otara school and an early childhood course at the Rowandale school. The courses were chosen to provide the best fit between the MFLP goals and the programs that were eligible for government funding at the tertiary providers. The tertiary providers were the Manukau Institute of Technology and Auckland University of Technology. In both cases, these courses have meshed reasonably well with the ideals of family literacy, with the added ad-

vantage that passing these courses also provides the learners with formalized qualifications that have broad recognition outside the MFLP.

Feedback from the learners specifically identified the *Future Focus* component (a career planning module) of the Bairds Otara program as particularly valuable in helping develop medium- to long-term aims — something that most reported they had never had previously. With the Rowandale program, the early childhood development focus of the certificate appears to have been an invaluable basis for many debates about parenting issues. Feedback from the parents indicated that most of them had strongly valued the debates and now felt they had a broader repertoire of parenting options available as a result, including alternatives to corporal punishment as a form of discipline.

Both courses have content that is more related to the graduation requirements of the tertiary institution that employs the teachers than the personal learning needs of the participants, yet both programs have been flexible around these requirements because of the skills of the teachers involved. This flexibility has enabled the teachers to maximize the relevance of the courses for the learners.

Non-PACT Children

Feedback from the adults to the evaluator indicated that some of the parents felt some unease and disappointment about being able to nominate only one child to take part in PACT time. This issue mainly concerned parents with more than one child at the same school or early childhood center. However, even those parents with one child at the school and one at the early childhood center, for example, still reported the non-PACT child feeling left out, envious, or both. This issue has been debated within MFLP and various options discussed. One partial solution has been tried at one site where the adult educator endeavors to alternate non-PACT children from the school in activities that are not part of the ongoing literacy program (e.g., art class). This variation has been rated positively by those involved and does not detract from the overall functioning of PACT.

Conclusion

All forms of educational provision encounter a range of issues in their implementation, especially during their initial stages. Developing family literacy programs, therefore, are not alone in having many issues to resolve, although some issues are unique to family literacy's particular characteristics and location within the educational system. Family literacy does not sit readily within conventional educational structures, and this is true both internationally (Padak et al., 2002) and in New Zealand. This difficulty occurs largely because traditional educational systems are age-stratified and family literacy transcends these traditional categories. This lack of fit can be seen, for example, in problems of accessing funding, finding appropriate staff, and coordination between the different educational players involved.

Despite these difficulties, however, family literacy continues to attract the attention of policy makers and funding agencies in many countries. Unlike the United States, New Zealand has only recently created a distinct funding stream to fit the unique characteristics of family literacy; this move was largely based on the evaluation findings of the MFLP. In the United Kingdom, family literacy is enjoying similar attention (Hannon & Bird, 2004), driven in part by the results of a large-scale literature review that underlined the value of parental involvement in raising children's academic achievements (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

Family literacy has been a distinctive innovation for New Zealand education. It transcends the traditional age-bound nature of literacy provision by integrating instruction for both parents and children and is seen increasingly as a means of creating learning communities around schools. This is a current policy priority for the New Zealand education system. In this way, family literacy can be seen as an exemplar of lifelong learning by breaking the mold of front-loaded educational programs. Whether it can also break the mold of intergenerational literacy difficulties remains to be seen.

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