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Taking stock of family literacy: Some contemporary perspectives

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Abstract The purpose of this article is to examine developments in the area of family literacy over the last decade. Acknowledging the bifurcation that has occurred in the field of family literacy, as well as changing conceptions of literacy and of families, we review naturalistic studies of literacy embedded and enacted in communities and families across different sociocultural context and also what we see as the evolving nature of family literacy programs. We conclude with an acknowledgement of some of the ongoing concerns, issues, and tensions in the field and a call for sensitivity on the part of all of us involved in family literacy research and programs.

Keywords families; family literacy; literacy; literacy practices; sociocultural

Since the publication of Denny Taylor's (1983) foundational study of six middle-class families, interest in the family as a site for literacy has proliferated. As others have pointed out, 'family literacy' connotes different things for different people; for some, it means intervention programs usually aimed at low-literate or marginalized families while for others, it encapsulates the myriad ways that literacy is practiced and promoted within the context of the family.

Our charge from the editors for writing this article was to 'review developments in the field of family literacy over the last ten years'. And although family literacy is a relatively new field of study, several substantive reviews (e.g. Purcell-Gates, 2000) and handbooks and surveys (e.g. Wasik, 2004) have already been published. Therefore, the purpose of this

article is not to repeat what has already been done. Rather, in this article we: (1) provide a theoretical frame which guides our analysis of family literacy; (2) review contemporary research that we believe is expanding our notions of family literacy; (3) examine some of the major issues in family literacy programs and how these are being addressed or not; and (4) conclude with some lingering issues and continuing conundrums.

Theoretical framework

Overarching our analysis and interpretation of the research in family literacy is socio-historical theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Central to this theory is the notion that much learning is social as parents and caregivers, for example, verbally guide children within the zone of proximal development. According to Vygotsky, adults structure activities so that children engage in more complex behaviors than they could on their own. Adults and significant others pose questions, phrase statements and provide support relative to children's current knowledge, and thus extend children's learning beyond where they are currently functioning. More recently, Rogoff (2003) and others have emphasized the cultural aspects of such learning, showing that the ways in which learning is supported significantly differ across cultures. And as will be discussed later, Gregory and her colleagues have demonstrated the important role of younger children in supporting each other's learning. We also draw upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of child development to inform our analysis. He claimed that children's development was influenced by three overlapping contexts or spheres of home, community and school. Also informing our work is the literacy as social practices paradigm (Heath, 1983). From within this perspective, literacy is seen not just as an amalgam of cognitive and linguistic skills, but as complex social and cultural practices (Barton et al., 2000; Street, 1995). That is, the meanings ascribed to literacy, the functions and purposes literacy serves, and how literacy is learned and taught differ from one socio-cultural context to another (Clay, 1993). We are also guided by emerging work in multiple literacies (e.g. Cope and Kalantzis, 2000) or multimodalities (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). Especially interesting to us is how the affordances offered by digital technologies get taken up by families. And finally, we are mindful that literacy is never neutral. Work in critical literacy (e.g. Freire, 1997; Luke and Luke, 2001) reminds us that although literacy is potentially liberating, it also can perpetuate social inequalities, covering hegemonic roles (Graff, 1995). We acknowledge the fact that literacy is often oversold and does not necessarily equate well-being – socially, personally or economically (Graff, 1995).

Evolving understandings of family literacy

Expanding conceptions of families and literacies

Typically, family literacy is thought of as intergenerational with *the parent* or, as Mace (1998) and others have argued, supporting children's literacy development. More recent ethnographic work with families has challenged this perspective. For example, Eve Gregory (2001) and her colleagues have demonstrated the important roles that siblings play in supporting literacy learning. Drawing on audiotaped episodes of Bangladeshi children's play at home, Gregory showed not only how younger children's language and literacy benefitted from their older siblings' teaching but also how the older children's language and literacy was enhanced because of it. Gregory questioned the assumption inherent in current educational thinking that children's learning necessarily involves scaffolding by an adult, arguing instead for a more reciprocal view of such learning. Although school literacy and at-home literacy are sometimes portrayed dichotomously in the literature, she argued that the children's language and literacy practices reflected syncretism as children borrowed and melded elements from home, school, church and community literacies.

Researchers have also examined the role of extended family members in young children's literacy development. For example, Gregory et al.'s (2007) work with South Asian immigrant families demonstrated the important role of grandparents in young children's literacy development. Using ethnographic techniques, these researchers found that grandparents used a complex blend of traditional teaching practices from the Bengal and contemporary western pedagogy as they worked productively with their grandchildren with a wide array of texts. According to Gregory et al. (2007: 11), these practices exemplify syncretism that they saw not just as a mixing of traditional cultural practices and forms, but 'instead as a creative process in which people reinvent culture as they draw on diverse resources, both familiar and new'.

Mui and Anderson (2008) documented the family literacy practices of six-year-old Genna Johar, growing up in a joint Indo-Canadian family in Canada. In addition to her parents and her siblings, Genna's grandparents, and her two uncles, their wives and children all live in the same household. Locally, large houses accommodating extended or joint families are derisively called 'monster houses'. In the Johar household, all of the finances are pooled and childrearing is also a joint responsibility. For example, if neither of Genna's parents is available for parent-teacher interviews, one of her aunts attends. As with the children in Gregory's (2001) study, the siblings support each other's literacy learning but here also, the cousins

support one another. The Johars value literacy highly and they have compiled a large collection of school literacy activities such as workbooks and practice exercises. The family is financially well off and they hire nannies to help with the household chores and to look after the children. The nannies also play a significant role in the children's literacy development, pretending to be students when the children play school, participating in game shows and dramas that the children create based on those they have seen on television, and participating in board games with them. Although Genna attends an English school and speaks English with the nannies, she also is fluent in Punjabi, which she speaks when talking to her grandparents and aunts and uncles. Notably absent from the household is storybook reading, although her mother sings to Genna and her brother at bedtime because they do not enjoy shared book reading.

In some ways, the Johar family embodies the concept of a 'gemeinschaft community' or the notion that 'it doesn't matter where or with whom "business" is transacted as long as it gets done' (Crozier and Davies, 2006: 681). They also challenge the notion quite prevalent in the family literacy movement that the nuclear family is the model upon which many of the assumptions about families and about literacy are based.

Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, researchers have also looked at how family literacy practices intersect with, and are influenced by, community literacy practices. For example, in their work with the families of three Puerto Rican kindergarten children, Volk and de Acosta (2001), explored how the families borrowed practices and the texts from church in supporting children's literacy learning. As with Gregory's work in east London, the literacy practices here were syncretic and for example, as Volk and de Acosta (2001: 206) explained, the families treated 'the Bible reading as a reading lesson as well as a religious event, using strategies characteristic of classroom teachers'. However, unlike the 'meaning construction' stance considered essential and heavily promoted by many literacy educators, the families tended to assume the meaning 'always lie', in the text, which are not subject to interpretation or negotiation. Volk and de Acosta (2001: 195) argued that when teachers define reading as constructing meaning, 'they may overlook or dismiss memorization, repetition and group recitation'; all practices that contributed productively to the children's literacy learning in these families in this community. In her work with Chinese immigrant families, Li (2003) has also shown the role of rote memorization, drill and practice, and precision in children's literacy at home, practices often regarded as anathema by many literacy educators. And consistent with Volk and de Acosta's finding of the contribution of religion in children's early literacy, Frett

(2008) also found the church an important site in terms of the literacy practices of the three six-year-old boys she studied in the British Virgin Islands. Likewise, as with the Mui and Anderson (2008) study, Volk and de Acosta also found that extended family members contributed to the children's early learning.

The studies just reviewed all point to adults and significant others supporting young children's literacy. However, it is important to remember that in some families, the opposite is true and it is the younger children who support their parents' literacy. For example, Perry (2009) studied the brokering practices in Sudanese refugee families in Michigan. She concluded that very young children were 'engaging in very sophisticated brokering about texts and simultaneously displaying their emerging knowledge of complex literacy practices' (Perry, 2009: 274) as they helped their families negotiate a new language and culture.

Shared book reading and family literacy

Recently, a friend of ours, referring to our ongoing work in family literacy programs, remarked on how wonderful it was that we were working in communities 'teaching parents how to read books to their children'. Although naturalistic research (e.g. Carrington and Luke, 2005; McTavish, 2009) demonstrates that families engage in a range of reading and writing practices and events, we believe our friend's comment was not far off the mark in terms of how shared book reading and family literacy have become nearly synonymous (Carrington and Luke, 2003). For example, in their analysis of a sample of family literacy program websites in Canada, Anderson et al. (2007) found that the dominant image by far depicted an adult reading a book to a child and that the written texts similarly promoted shared book reading as the literacy event 'par excellence' (Pellegrini, 1991: 380). Given this symbiosis, we believe it important to examine the literature on shared book reading.

First, as has been consistently pointed out, adult-child shared book reading is not a universal phenomenon; it is a particular social/cultural practice, particularly associated with Caucasian, middle-class families. Second, some cultural groups find the much ballyhooed dialogic storybook reading problematic and, for example, prefer a more didactic, moralistic stance where children are encouraged to listen to learn important life lessons (e.g. Janes and Kermani, 2001). Third, despite assumptions that it is through shared reading that children learn about print and decoding, there is consistent evidence that children and parents/caregivers tend not to attend to print in the shared reading context, focusing instead on the storyline and/or illustrations (e.g. Evans et al., 2008). Fourth, implied in

some of the shared reading literature, is the notion that there is a preferred or correct way for adults and children to share books, and some intervention programs train parents how to read to their children in specific ways. However, there is considerable diversity in how parent-child dyads from homogeneous groups share books (Anderson et al., 2009). Based on their analysis of shared reading of three parent-child pairs, Cairney and Ashton (2002) cautioned:

What our analysis demonstrates is that the sociolinguistic complexity of literacy support that adults offer, makes it difficult, (indeed unwise) to make simplistic statements about differences across literacy contexts, or even repeated occurrences of the same type of literacy event within a single context. (Cairney and Ashton, 2002: 304)

Finally, there is evidence that shared reading does contribute to children's language development including knowledge of literate discourse or book language and vocabulary (e.g. Britto and Brooks-Gunn, 2001). Taken together, then, these findings suggest a more modest role of shared book reading in children's language and literacy development than is commonly assumed. In the influential report, *Becoming A Nation of Readers*, Anderson et al. (1985/2003: 23) asserted, 'the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children'. Responding to that report, Stahl (2003) called such a claim, 'a bit of hyperbole'. Given meta-analyses (Bus et al., 1995; Scarborough and Dobrich, 1994) that found shared reading accounts for about eight per cent of the variance in early literacy achievement and our critical reading of the literature on shared book reading, we tend to agree with Stahl.

New/multi-literacies and family literacy

Koh (2004) and others argue we are living in 'new times' when advances in technology render obsolete many of our previous conceptions of what it means to become literate. As is argued elsewhere in this article, family literacy still tends to be conceptualized quite conservatively by the public and by policy makers and program providers. However, naturalistic studies of families reveal that some of them are adapting to these new times and adopting technology into literacy practices.

For example, Carrington and Luke (2003) documented the literacy practices of Eve, a six-year old from a middle class family, and James, a five-year old growing up in a lower socioeconomic status (SES) community. Being raised by her single parent father, Eve used email daily to communicate with her mother who lived in another household. She also used CD-ROMs extensively and was adroit at using the Web. Although she was not

read to in the idealized bedtime story routine, Eve's email exchanges were 'more interactive and exchange-based than the static print texts she will encounter in school-and certainly from the relatively static narratives about animals and community life that she is learning to read in shared book experience' (Carrington and Luke, 2003: 243). Although James did not have Internet access at home, he regularly used his cousin's computer to surf the Web and he and his cousin had access to a number of CD-ROMs. He also played video games extensively. Eve and James were both designated as having literacy difficulties at school. Yet, in their homes and communities they both engage in literacy practices that 'are necessary in new economic times' (Carrington and Luke, 2003: 248).

McTavish (2009) reported on the out-of-school literacy practices of eight-year-old Rajan and his family who had immigrated from India. Rajan used the Internet extensively and for example, daily checked sports scores, communicated with friends and family on MSN, and looked up information on the Web. He also regularly played video games. McTavish (2009: 17) commented that the content of video games sometimes spilled over into more traditional literacy practices and gave as an example a play that Rajan wrote based on a street racing video game that he had played. Apparently aiming to please his teacher, Rajan often talked to her about the books he would be reading at home to complete a school research project but in actuality, he confided to the researcher, 'I get my facts from the internet'. Like Carrington and Luke (2003), McTavish concluded that out of school, Rajan engaged in literacy practices that will serve him well in these 'new times'; unfortunately, these practices were not valued or built upon in his classroom.

As an increasing number of children's books become available in digitized formats, some families are beginning to use texts in that format for shared reading. For example, Kim and Anderson (2008) reported on a study involving a mother and her two sons, ages three and seven, sharing digital and traditional print texts. The texts were written in Korean, the first language of the family, living in an urban area of Canada. The mother-child dyads were videotaped as they shared three narrative texts of approximately the same difficulty: a book in traditional print format; a book in CD-ROM format, and a book in video format streaming on the Internet. The CD-ROM format had icons for page turning; the video format did not allow control of the page turning. Interestingly, more decontextualized or extended talk occurred in the digital texts than in the print book and more labelling and other forms of contextualized talk in the print book. Decontextualized talk is thought to contribute to children's cognitive and language development (Sigel, 1993) and it is tempting to conclude that in this regard, digital texts

offer affordances that print texts do not. However, some caution is noted in that with younger children, labelling and other forms of contextualized talk are important (Ninio and Bruner, 1976) and some digital texts that do not allow the adult or the child to control the page turning may limit or even preclude this type of talk.

Of course, it must be recognized that not all families have equal access to computers and other digital tools (Rodriguez, 2004). For example, last year we worked with a group of 21 Karen speaking refugee families originally from Myanmar, many of whom had spent years living in refugee camps in Thailand before recently immigrating to Canada. Only three of the families had computers at home and these were refurbished and donated from a local social agency. Indeed, when we provided the families with CD-ROMs containing a collection of nursery rhymes in different languages, we also needed to supply CD players. Although obviously many families are taking up different forms of digital literacies, we also need to be aware that the digital divide (James, 2008) still exists for many of them.

Family literacy programs

Differing conceptions of involving families in literacy

Family literacy programs more typically have involved caregivers and parents attending a number of sessions, each addressing a particular theme or topic. However, different models of involving family members in children's literacy and in promoting literacy in the context of the family have been developed. For example, Wollman-Bonilla (2001) reported on a project involving family message journals in which parents were expected to respond to the journal entries children wrote and took home regularly. Working with mostly middle-class, English speaking families, Wollman-Bonilla (2001: 176) found that parents supported the children's writing by asking questions and by acknowledging the content of the message. Interestingly, some employed a range of genres in responding including, '(1) informational texts, (2) jokes and riddles, (3) narrative, (4) moral lessons, and (5) poetic texts'.

As part of a project involving families and early childhood educators, Flee and Raban (2007: 107) investigated how families employed the suggestions from a set of 'Clever Cards' provided to them. These postcard sized cards had a photograph and caption on the front and a description of an everyday activity that potentially contributes to children's numeracy and literacy development on the back. Through surveys and interviews, families were asked whether they found the information on the cards useful. They reported that the information on the cards was helpful and that it made

them aware of how young children's everyday experiences can support children's cognitive development. Interestingly, some aboriginal families indicated that a different format such as refrigerator magnets or placemats would have been more suitable, pointing to the need for family literacy program providers to pay attention to context. Of course, the approach used in this project would be highly problematic for families with low literacy skills and for those unable to read in English. Furthermore, as Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) pointed out, these types of activities are quite gendered and projects like this one place responsibility, and some would argue guilt, on mothers.

Kyle et al. (2005) described a project in which teachers visited children's homes in order to become familiar with and then to build on and support the children's 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992). As might be expected, the teachers developed deeper understanding of the children and their families and thus were able to make a connection between children's literacy at home and literacy at school. But they also gained insights into how families were attempting to help their children at home and were able to provide concrete suggestions to families to enhance that support. Furthermore, as a result of the project, families were able to recognize how children benefit from commonplace experiences that they previously would not have thought of as being educationally important, a finding consistent with the Fleer and Raban study.

Obviously, there are many other models of family literacy programs and that these are but examples of some of the ways that people are enacting differing ways of working with families. Caution is called for in that some of these approaches, while apparently working well in the communities in which they were implemented, might not be suitable for other contexts. For example, the message journals described by Wollman-Bonilla (2001) simply would not work in many of the schools where we currently work because parents do not have sufficient literacy ability in English, and in some cases in their first language, to respond to the children's messages.

Social contextual concerns and family literacy programs

Over the years, major concerns have been expressed about family literacy programs (e.g. Auerbach, 1989; Reyes and Torres, 2007). Central to these critiques is the notion that the home languages and home literacy practices are suppressed as *school literacy* is promoted, indeed imposed, on families, especially those from marginalized communities and speaking the non-dominant language. Undoubtedly, some such programs continue to operate. However, there are family programs that we believe go beyond tokenism and the rhetoric of capitalizing on family strengths (Auerbach, 1995).

Perkins (in press) traced the evolution of a program called Parents As Literacy Supporters, or PALS, with Vietnamese families in Langley, British Columbia. PALS began when the mayor of Langley, a suburban community near Vancouver, invited the developers (Anderson and Morrison, 2000) to become involved in a multi-agency, inner-city, community development initiative. Having worked in family literacy programs previously, the developers conducted several focus sessions with families, early childhood educators, and administrators and out of these, a set of guidelines and principles evolved and prototype modules were developed. The PALS program was then piloted in two inner-city schools in Langley, and the next year, expanded to two other schools in Vancouver. The goal of the program is to work with parents and caregivers in supporting children's early literacy development and it is designed for families of children three to five years of age. The program consists of 10–15, two-hour sessions held about two to three weeks apart. Each session covers a topic identified by families, including learning the alphabet, early mathematics, learning to read, early writing, and technology or as the families called it, 'computers'. Some sessions are left open so that topics of concern or interest to a specific community can be addressed. Sessions begin with families and facilitators sharing food, after which the facilitators and adults meet for about one-half hour and the children go to the kindergarten or early childhood classroom. The adults are encouraged to talk about the topic of the day, for example, what they have observed about their children's scribbling and/or drawing and/or early attempts to write or their memories of learning mathematics. Then, the adults join the children in the classroom for about one hour where they work with their children at a series of centers with different literacy activities reflective of the topic or focus of the session. The session closes with a debriefing session where the adults reflect on the session, sharing observations and insights and so forth. Families are provided with a high quality children's book and other resources such as markers and construction paper and pencils to take home.

As Perkins reported, the Vietnamese immigrant and refugee families in the community she worked tended to resist efforts of the school to involve them in traditional activities such as parent-teacher interviews, special school events and assemblies, and so forth. Working with the developers of PALS, school district administrators, and perhaps more importantly, a cultural worker from the Vietnamese community, the school decided to offer the PALS program in Vietnamese to all families in the community, not just from the catchment area of the school.

In the initial year, PALS was offered in Vietnamese with translated materials and Vietnamese/English bilingual children's books. Very early, however,

the adults expressed a need and desire to improve their own language and literacy abilities in English. Marshalling various resources, the school responded quickly, tacking on an hour of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction for adults to each PALS session. In the second year, many of the families returned and expressed considerable interest in the ESL instruction. However, this time they wanted to learn more about computers and the Internet, and particularly using these resources to search for information, to learn how to use email, and to download newspapers and other information from their homeland, Vietnam. Again, the school responded creatively, utilizing the school's technology laboratory and a group of grade seven Vietnamese speaking students who were quite knowledgeable in technology. By the third year, many of the children who had participated in the first two years were in kindergarten. In addition, many of the parents had become very comfortable with computer use and with the Internet. Now, they indicated they wanted to learn more about issues around parenting. Working with the school's guidance counselor and Vietnamese cultural worker, the school's administration organized a series of workshops for the parents addressing the parenting and other issues they wished to discuss.

A similar evolution of a program to fit the social-contextual needs of families was described by Janes and Kermani (2001). Working with immigrant Spanish speaking families, they initially set out to teach parents how to read to their children in the dialogic reading style supposedly typical of middle-class, Caucasian families and heavily promoted in many intervention programs. However, the families found the experiences very unsettling and disturbing. Indeed, they saw the shared reading experiences being imposed on them as 'punishment'. Realizing that the program was 'not working', the researchers listened to the families and made changes, encouraging them to read in the discourse styles with which they were familiar and to select the texts they wanted to read with their children. Analysis of taped shared reading subsequent to the change revealed that the adults employed a didactic stance when reading to their children, that they selected moralistic texts to share, not the highly regarded and well-recognized children's literature that the researchers provided, and that the shared reading had become more pleasurable events that families no longer dreaded.

Taylor et al. (2008) described an initiative in a kindergarten classroom where the children representing a variety of linguistic groups, with the help of teachers, cultural workers, and family members, produced a bilingual book. Through questioning, children were led to think about, and then to draw themselves. Next they were encouraged to dictate their

thoughts that were transcribed in English by the teacher and adult helpers. Children then took the drawings and their transcribed dictations home and family members were encouraged to translate the children's dictations into the child's first language. Parents and family members were asked to return the transcribed texts and the drawings, along with suitable photographs to the school. Each child's book was then bound and scanned electronically so it could be shared with other relatives and with friends. Taylor et al. (2008) concluded that their project demonstrated even within an English dominant class, pedagogy that validates the home language and literacy practices is possible. Pelletier and her colleagues have been working on a similar project centered around photography with immigrant families living in housing complexes in an inner city area of Toronto (J. Pelletier, personal communications, May 2008).

Based on her extensive work with Project Flame, Rodriguez-Brown (2004: 220) argued that while family literacy programs need to recognize the knowledge, skills and resources that families bring to the program, they also need to 'add to and build on' (emphasis in original) these. She concluded that in addition to helping develop language and literacy skills, Project Flame also led to increased self-efficacy on the part of parents that in turn, helped them 'move beyond their own community, look for jobs and achieve a sense of fulfillment they had never enjoyed' (Rodriguez-Brown, 2004: 227). We see the projects and initiatives just described as examples where families' literacy and language practices are recognized and built on and where families have voice.

Evaluating family literacy programs

One of the major criticisms of family literacy programs has been the relative dearth of systematic evaluation (e.g. Purcell-Gates, 2000). For as Thomas and Skage (1998: 20) reported, 'the level of program evaluation in family literacy amounts to little more than testimonials'. It appears that in the intervening decade since these two reports, researchers and family literacy program providers have taken these concerns to heart, perhaps because of the fact that funders want evidence that programs make a difference. We next look at some of these evaluation studies.

Phillips et al. (2006) conducted a quasi-experimental, multi-year, study involving nearly 200 families in an urban area of Canada. They found that young children who participated in the Learning Together: Read and Write with Your Child program made statistically significant gains in literacy achievement compared to children in the control group. As might be expected given the focus on children's literacy, not adult literacy, there was no program effect found for adults.

Many family literacy programs tend to work with families of preschoolers and to focus on reading. However, Saint-Laurent and Giasson (2005) examined the impact of a family literacy program on grade one children's writing. They found that children from low- and middle-SES families whose parents had participated in a family literacy program consisting of nine, 90-minute workshops on various topics across a school year scored significantly higher on measures of writing including sentence structure, vocabulary, spelling and length of text than a demographically similar comparison group.

In a more recent study, Anderson and Purcell-Gates (in press) measured the effects of a program called Literacy for Life, an intergenerational program for low literate immigrant and refugee families. Instruction in the program focused on using authentic literacy activities, defined as the use of real life texts for real life purposes. Pre- and post-test comparisons of Normal Curve Equivalent scores on the Test of Early Reading Ability-3 (Reid et al., 2001) and the Reading Comprehension, and Spelling subtests of the Canadian Adult Achievement Test revealed statistically significant gains for both children and adults.

Taking a different tack, Nutbrown and Hannon (2003) interviewed children as to their perceptions of family literacy and of family literacy programs. Foregrounding the purpose of their study, they argued, 'educational research is one of the last arenas in society where it is still the case that children-especially young children-are seen and not heard' (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003: 116). Comparing a group of children who had not participated in a family literacy program with a group of children who had, they concluded: (1) all of the children were engaged in some literacy at home; (2) contrary to what is sometimes thought, fathers were engaged in children's home literacy; (3) the boys were involved in literacy; and (4) a family literacy program positively affected family literacy practices (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003: 141).

Because previous research has shown that families from low-SES and marginalized communities tend to feel alienated from schools, Anderson and Morrison (2007) surveyed parents who had participated in a year-long family literacy program with their four- and five-year-old children. Participants reported: (1) they understood expectations of school and felt better able to support their children's learning at home; (2) they felt more comfortable in school and felt they had developed the capacity to advocate for themselves and their children; and (3) they had developed important social networks to share knowledge and strategies that middle-class families tend to avail of and deploy (Laureau, 1987).

In their meta-study, Brooks et al. (2008), reviewed effective and

inclusive programs and practices in family literacy, language and numeracy. They reviewed programs located in the UK as well as internationally. In all, 29 programs were reviewed: 16 quantitatively and 13 qualitatively. Results from the quantitative analysis revealed that both parents and children benefitted from their participation in these programs. As with the Phillips et al. study, evidence suggests children's literacy, language and numeracy skills benefitted as compared to those of their parents. However, parents reported they did benefit in terms of their ability to help their child's education but also in areas such as child-rearing practices, employment and self-confidence. Qualitative analysis of 13 international programs revealed that the delivery of these programs had become multi-modal. Furthermore, there is some evidence that some of these programs are being linked to indigenous literacy practices with parents being trained as facilitators, perhaps in response to the criticism (e.g. Reyes and Torres, 2007) that family literacy programs tend to supplant vernacular literacies with mainstream or school-like literacies. The visibility of home literacy and numeracy practices within programs varies. Furthermore, as has been argued elsewhere, family literacy is becoming women's literacy as many program providers and participants in programs are women.

Another meta-study (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008) had as a major goal the identification of programs that promoted early literacy as these skills are linked to later school achievement. Analyzing 20 research studies, the panel concluded that these programs had statistically significant and moderate to large effects on children's oral language skills and general cognitive abilities.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that family literacy programs are effective in enhancing young children's literacy learning and adults' literacy learning, provided there is sufficient focus on adult literacy instruction. Furthermore, other social and cultural benefits accrue beyond enhanced literacy skills. Nevertheless, there are issues in evaluating family literacy programs that need acknowledgement. First, quasi-experimental studies where families are in essence excluded from participation raise significant ethical and moral issues. Of course, these concerns may be ameliorated if a delayed treatment control group design is used. Furthermore, formal assessments tend to tap a fairly narrow range of literacy skills and knowledge and although these measures have typically been shown to correlate with children's literacy performance in school, questions as to whether these capture some of the essential learning have been raised. Issues also have been raised about 'the lack of congruence between the ways that families use literacy to negotiate the daily activities in their own lives and the ways that literacy is assessed in

school . . . and of the appropriation of cultural practices' (Phillips et al., 2006: 24). Given the differing epistemological perspectives and ideologies of those involved in family literacy programs, these tensions are not likely to dissipate soon.

Discussion and conclusion

Continuing ethnographic and sociolinguistic work with families and communities clearly shows the situated nature of literacy within these contexts. Although earlier research tended to focus on the parent as playing the central role in young children's literacy development, more contemporary work shows that other significant people in children's lives also sometimes play important roles in supporting literacy. Furthermore, while much of the literature still implies that family means the so called nuclear family, it is obvious that families need to be construed quite broadly. For example, in the Indo-Canadian family in the Mui and Anderson (2008) article, the nannies were an important part of the children's language and literacy learning. Despite the fact that some families do not engage in shared book reading, and that shared book reading appears to contribute less to children's literacy development than is commonly believed, it is still strongly associated with – indeed, in some quarters, synonymous with – family literacy. As technology advances and digital literacy proliferates and becomes accessible, it appears that families and young children are taking these up. Interestingly, in these times of unprecedented migration and movement of people, there are suggestions that families might be using these tools to maintain contact with friends and relatives in their former homes. Indeed, the Internet may serve as a powerful tool in terms of culture, identity, and language maintenance.

Family literacy programs continue to be controversial for despite continued rhetoric about family strengths and socio-contextual responsiveness, deficit discourse-and we believe deficit thinking-undergirds many of them (Nichols et al., 2009). In fact, some programs openly articulate the inoculating principle (Luke and Luke, 2001) as the following example cited by Anderson et al. (2008) shows:

Encouraging early childhood literacy could turn out to be our most potent 'immunizing' agent. It confers a high degree of lifetime immunity against poverty, educational failure, low self-esteem and poor health. Can you think of any vaccine that offers such a high level of lasting protection against so many serious human afflictions? (Richard Goldbloom, OC MD FRCPC, Honourary Chair of the Read to Me! program, cited on the IWK Health Centre Website)

However, as we pointed out earlier, there are programs that do reflect the needs and aspirations of families and communities and that evolve and change with shifting socio-contextual realities of families. Perkins' (in press) documentation of the work with the Vietnamese families in her study is a good example of this. But this is hard work. We are currently working with families from different linguistic communities (Farsi, Karen, Mandarin, Punjabi) modeled on the program described by Perkins in which we conduct sessions in the first language of the families, model writing in the language with the help of a cultural worker, and provide bilingual books. As part of data collection, we had families collect all of the children's scribbling, drawing, early writing, and so forth. Preliminary analysis indicates nearly a complete lack of any orthography other than English. Of course, we will interview parents to try to understand why this is so. But our intuitions suggest that families see English as the 'power code' (Delpit, 1995) and they want their children to access that and direct their energies and support in helping children learn it.

Lingering issues and future possibilities

Despite the overwhelming evidence that most children engage in literacy activities in the context of their families and communities, deficit notions of families and their literacies still persist in schools and other institutions. Based on her work with marginalized families, Compton-Lilly (2007: 75) concluded, 'reading [or literacy] in schools is contingent upon a complex set of practices and ways of being that often fail to reflect the rich strengths and abilities that are valued in home communities'. Indeed, as Marsh (2003) found, although families imported literacy practices from school, the traffic was one way and there was very little evidence of the school taking up literacy practices from the home.

One of the major criticisms of family literacy programs is that they unfairly place responsibility for children's literacy development on women. For example, in their critical analysis of the Parent Education Profile, an instrument used by some family literacy programs to measure support for children's literacy development, Prins and Toso (2008: 577) concluded 'it is women who will be observed and rated, whose time and energy will be directed toward children's schooling'. Similarly, Mace (1998) argued that family literacy programs position mothers as conduits for their children's literacy development, tending to ignore the literacy needs and desires of women.

But as reported earlier, Nutbrown and Hannon (2003) found that fathers were involved in the literacy lives of the children they interviewed.

Furthermore, Macleod (2008: 779–81) found that the fathers she interviewed cited a number of reasons for discontinuing attending family literacy programs including: (1) perceived threats to their masculine identities; (2) feeling threatened by what they regarded as a feminized environment and gendered tasks; and (3) feeling unwelcomed by the women participants in the program. Based on the literature and our experiences working in family literacy programs, it appears to us that gender issues in family literacy persist and are unlikely to be soon resolved.

Although there is a growing body of empirical evidence that family literacy programs do enhance young children's literacy knowledge, there is a lack of longitudinal research that demonstrates that this impact lasts. Likewise, there is evidence that family literacy programs positively affect adult participants, in terms of self-efficacy (Rodriguez-Brown, 2004) and developing social capital (Anderson and Morrison, 2007). But again, there is need for more research that addresses how residual this growth is.

However, more recent conceptualizations of family literacy programs go beyond impacting children's literacy or parents' self-efficacy. For example, Pahl and Kelly (2005) demonstrate how family literacy can be a 'third space' where families can engage in literacy from both home and school or in hybridized forms borrowing from both contexts. Anderson and Morrison (2007) found that the family literacy program they worked in promoted inter-subjectivity in that as families and teachers worked together, they began to develop much deeper understandings of each others expectations and perspectives. Likewise, in the only retrospective study that we could find, Anderson et al. (2008) found that the parents with whom they had worked in a family literacy program nearly 20-years earlier remembered the making visible of the early literacy pedagogy of the school as the most significant thing they learned.

To conclude, our sampling of current research suggests that conceptions of family literacy and family literacy programs continue to evolve and that complexity is an inherent feature of the phenomenon. Although there are promising family literacy programs, there are also many that reflect deficit perceptions of communities and families. Furthermore we see a need to maintain reasonable expectations of family literacy programs. We also want to recognize that in most cases, families have agency and they can elect to attend programs or not. That many of them elect to attend, we believe suggests that families see value in these programs and we do not believe that this is a case of false consciousness.

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