Constructing Families, Constructing Literacy: A Critical Analysis of Family Literacy Websites

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to critically examine how family literacy is promoted and represented on websites developed by family literacy program providers. Naturalistic research over the last 20 years or so demonstrates that the family is a rich site for supporting children's literacy development across socioeconomic and cultural contexts. That research suggests that families engage children in a wide array of literacy activities in their daily lives. Furthermore, significant others, in addition to parents, play important roles in children's literacy development. In this study, we examined a representative sample of family literacy websites from across Canada. Findings suggest that: family literacy programs tend to focus almost exclusively on young children, families are portrayed narrowly, deficit notions of families are still prevalent, and the promises made about the impact of family literacy programs go far beyond what the limited research evidence available suggests.

Key Words: family literacy programs, literacy development, critical literacy, parents, children, siblings, early childhood, deficit theory, storybook reading, writing, websites, families, communities, Canada, Internet, first teacher

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to analyze how families and literacy are represented (or portrayed) in the texts on websites that advertise and promote

family literacy programs in Canada. Given the promotion of family literacy programs in most western countries and the increasing availability of and accessibility to the Internet, we believe it is timely and important to investigate what information about families and about literacy is being conveyed through this medium. The following questions guided the study:

1) What messages about families are conveyed in the texts on family literacy websites?
2) What messages about literacy are being conveyed?
3) What promises about literacy are implied or explicitly stated?

Perspectives and Background

Interest in the family as a site for literacy development can be traced to Denny Taylor's classic book, *Family Literacy* (1983). Using ethnographic techniques, she documented daily literacy events of young children in six middle-class families. She found that children participated in an array of literacy activities and events at home and in the community as families went about their daily lives. Taylor concluded that there was very little evidence of children being formally taught literacy skills; rather, parents immersed their children in daily literacy events through which children were acculturated into literacy. More recently, Lenters (2007) reached similar conclusions in her study that examined how a middle-class boy appropriates the literacy practices that are a part of daily family and community life.

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) followed Taylor's first study by working with a group of families living in an economically depressed and dangerous inner city area. They found that despite incredible challenges, the families regularly engaged the children in reading and writing and had a very high regard for literacy and for education. Researchers such as Anderson and Stokes (1984), Reyes (1992), and McTavish (2007) reached similar conclusions based on their work with families considered at risk.

Gregory (2001) challenged the conventional assumption that family literacy mainly involves parents engaging in literacy with their children. Based on her work with Bangladeshi Anglo families in a socially and economically disadvantaged area of London, Gregory (2001) documented the ways in which siblings supported each other's language and literacy learning at home through their play routines. Her work is especially significant in that it demonstrates how children can support each others' learning to read and write in a second or additional language. She describes this support "as a synergy, a unique reciprocity whereby siblings act as adjuvants in each other's learning…" (p. 309). Gregory and her colleagues have extended their work to document the roles

that grandparents and other family members play in supporting children's language and literacy development (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004).

A dominant perspective in the educational and research literature is that young children's literacy learning is contingent upon active support from a parent or significant other. A classic study by Tizzard, Schofield, and Hewison (1982) in an economically depressed area of London challenged that assumption. Assigning intact classes to one of three conditions, they compared the effects of having: (1) one group of children read to their parents or a significant other; (2) a second group receive remedial tutoring in reading from a trained teacher at school; and (3) and a third group of children receive no assistance outside of regular classroom instruction. Results showed that the children who read each day to a parent (or significant other) made significant gains, whereas the children in the remedial reading program and those in the control group did not. The study demonstrated that parents and other family members can play important roles simply by *listening* to young children's reading.

Thus, most educators and researchers now recognize that the family can play an important role in children's early literacy development. In particular, researchers have documented that parents and other caregivers support children's literacy by: encouraging them to "write" notes, messages, lists, and so forth (Taylor, 1983); reading print in the home and community such as signs, books, advertisements, religious materials, notes, grocery lists, and logos (Purcell-Gates, 1996); encouraging language development through discussion, and through riddles, rhymes, raps, and songs (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001); teaching, in developmentally appropriate ways, the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they represent (Senechal & Lefevre, 2002); supporting their young children's responses to popular culture texts (Lenters, 2007); and providing role models as readers and writers (Anderson, 1995). As well, young children use a range of symbols to construct and represent meaning (Kress, 1997; Marsh, 2006). Furthermore, siblings and extended family members support each other's literacy development, especially when the parents are unable to provide support (e.g., Gregory, 2005).

Whereas studies such as those just cited tended to be naturalistic documentations of family literacy practices, Purcell-Gates (2000) pointed out that the term *family literacy* has come to be associated with *family literacy programs*, oriented toward enhancing young children's literacy development. Critics maintain such programs are based on deficit notions of family (Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001) and promote "school literacy" while ignoring or devaluing literacy practices that families engage in at home and in the community (Auerbach, 1995). Furthermore, Hendrix (1999) argued that family literacy programs are oversold in that there is a lack of empirical evidence that they contribute

significantly to young children's literacy development. So despite the proliferation of family literacy programs, important questions have been raised about their orientation, intent, and efficacy.

The present study is framed within several theoretical perspectives. Our work is informed by literacy as social practices paradigm (e.g., Heath, 1983; Street, 1995). From this perspective, literacy is viewed not simply as an amalgam of cognitive and linguistic skills transferable from one context to another, but also as complex social practices that vary contextually. The research is also informed by the foundational work of Vygotsky (1987) and other sociocultural learning theorists (e.g., Wertsch, 1985). From within this framework and in the context of family literacy, parents and significant others (including extended family members) lend the necessary support in learning a literacy skill or concept but "hand-off" the task to the children when they are capable of completing it independently (Rogoff, 1990).

Emerging conceptions of multiple literacies (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) also guide this work. From within this perspective, literacy is seen as extending beyond encoding and decoding print – notions that have been the foci of literacy in the past – and includes various forms of constructing and representing meaning. Finally, we are mindful of important work in critical literacy (e.g., Baker & Luke, 1991). That is, while we acknowledge that literacy can be transformative and liberating (Freire, 1997), it can also serve hegemonic roles in perpetuating inequity in terms of gender, social class, and so forth.

The current study extends previous research (Anderson, Streelasky, & Anderson, 2007; Kendrick, Anderson, Smythe, & Mackay, 2003) that examined how families and literacy are portrayed on websites. Kendrick et al. compared how five- and six-year-olds represented literacy through their drawings with the ways in which literacy was represented in images on family literacy websites. The children's drawings represented a wide variety of literacy practices (i.e., writing, reading, using computers, singing, etc.) involving different family members in different contexts (i.e., at church, at the playground, at home, in a parents' office, etc.). However, the dominant image on the websites was that of a woman (mother) reading to a young child; when other people were included, a traditional nuclear family configuration dominated. Book reading was the predominant literacy activity or event, while writing, oral language and other forms of literacy were noticeably absent. In nearly all cases, the literacy events were depicted as occurring at home or in more formal contexts such as day care centers or libraries.

In a follow-up study, Anderson et al. (2007) expanded the number of websites that were examined, insuring greater representation of the various geographical and cultural regions of Canada. Again, an adult (Caucasian, woman)

reading to a child was the dominant image. As well, book reading dominated, and there were few examples of writing, of people using technology, or of reading other forms of texts. Likewise, literacy was depicted as occurring at home or in more formal settings.

In the two previous studies, the *images* were analyzed as to the messages conveyed; in this paper, we focus on the *texts* on the web pages, although we occasionally allude to the images.

Method

To select the websites for this study, we searched the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD; http://www.nald.ca/) for all websites containing the term "family literacy." That search yielded a corpus of 48 websites, representing fairly equally the 10 provinces and three territories of Canada. NALD describes itself as a "federally incorporated, non-profit service organization which fills the crucial need for a single-source, comprehensive, up-to-date and easily accessible database of adult literacy programs, resources, services and activities across Canada" (NALD, 2002). Because many family literacy programs (ostensibly) have an adult literacy component, they are included in that database. As each family literacy website was identified, we downloaded the text and saved it as an RTF file. We then individually read all of the files and began to identify common threads and themes in response to each of the research questions. Next, we met and collectively compiled a list of key words for each theme. For example, we grouped terms such as *grandparents, grandmother, aunts and uncles, siblings, brother, sister* under the theme *extended family.* We then employed the Atlas-ti Visual Qualitative Data Analysis software to identify all instances of each theme on the websites and the frequency with which it occurred. Finally, we grouped the various themes into five clusters that we labelled: Forms of Literacy; Family Type; Literacy Messages; Family Messages; and Promises/Consequences of Literacy, as shown in the tables.

Results

Messages About Families

The first question that guided this study was "What messages about families are conveyed on family literacy websites?" In terms of the five clusters of themes referred to earlier and provided in the tables we first discuss Family Type.

Table 1. Family Types, *n* = 48

Themes	Frequency
Parents and children	30
Extended family (e.g., grandparents, siblings)	7
Specific (e.g., mom, dad)	10
Alternate family (e.g., single parent)	16
Deficit families (e.g., at risk families, teenage parents)	11

Family Type

As might be expected, the terms "parents and children" were found frequently, as shown in Table 1. Some programs alluded to the intergenerational notion of literacy development, but there were relatively few specific instances of the importance of extended family members (Gregory et al., 2004). Five sites named siblings and two sites named grandparents, an underrepresentation of the roles that extended family members play in supporting literacy, we believe. There were seven examples where mothers or women were identified and three for fathers or men. Mace (1998) and others contended that family literacy programs reflect gendered notions of parenting in that mothers are assumed to bear responsibility for children's early literacy development. And while the texts tended not to reflect this perspective, it should be remembered that we earlier found that a woman reading to a young child was by far the most pervasive image on these websites (Anderson et al., 2007). Attempts at expanded understandings or definitions of families were evident on several sites. Examples included the importance of recognizing "all types of families" and of construing families as "two or more people related by blood, marriages, adoption or commitment to one another." Interestingly, about one-third of the sites included the term "caregiver(s)," usually presented as "parents and caregivers" or "parents/caregivers," and we interpreted this as an attempt to recognize significant other adults. We found 11 websites that presented deficit notions such as "families most in need," "teenage parents," or "parents with low literacy skills." Given the criticism that many family literacy programs are incorrectly based on deficit notions of family, this finding was somewhat surprising. For example, Auerbach (1995) argued that while many family literacy programs proclaim that they build on family strengths, deficit assumptions undergird them. Noticeably absent in the texts we examined was mention of adolescents or youth (as members of the family), especially given the current interest in adolescents and literacy (e.g., Cassidy & Cassidy, 2007).

To summarize, "parents and children" were most frequently named in reference to family literacy programs. There was limited acknowledgement of the role of extended family members and of family configurations beyond the traditional nuclear family. And finally, some family literacy programs named families perceived as deficit as the targeted audience.

Table 2. Family Messages, *n* = 48

Themes	Frequency
Parenting (e.g., some families need to be taught, how to value literacy, how to teach literacy, how to parent)	31
Confidence (e.g., in ability to parent, to help child at home, higher levels of literacy)	19
First teacher (e.g., parents have the responsibility to prepare child for life)	16
Quality of life (e.g., quality of family life is connected to literacy)	13
School achievement (e.g., child's school achievement is connected to parent's literacy level)	13

Family Messages

We turn next to the themes that we clustered under Family Messages. Despite evidence that across sociocultural groups families tend to value and engage their children in literacy activities (e.g., Purcell-Gates, 1996; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1998), many of the sites we examined suggested that parents need to be taught to value and promote literacy (see Table 2). For example, the aim of one program was to have "Parents learn about their role in helping their children become readers and writers," while another proclaimed, "Family Literacy programs help parents become their child's first and most important teacher." That such shibboleths refer to particular "at risk" groups is more implied than explicit, for as was stated earlier, relatively few (11) of the 48 websites that were examined named these groups. Closely related to this theme was the notion of helping parents develop confidence in their parenting skills and in their role as literacy providers, the assumption being that "at risk" families lack confidence. Statements such as the following were fairly common: "Parents gain skills and confidence which can enable them to create positive family patterns during their children's crucial early years."

Another theme we found was that of the parent being the child's first (and most important) teacher. This message or some slightly different version of it occurred on approximately one third of the sites. Sometimes, the same message was more subtly presented, as in the following statement, "The family, however defined, is at the centre of this learning and the primary vehicle for transporting the child through the early years of life and into the future." This perspective is also promoted in some of the mainstream family literacy literature; for example, Morrow (1995) proclaimed, "Parents are the first teachers their children have, and they are the teachers that children have for the longest time" (p. 6). However, Smythe (2006) took issue with this notion, which she acknowledged has become a hallmark of the family literacy movement. She argued that this notion leads to the inequities that family literacy programs attempt to ameliorate, in that while some parents have the social capital, material

resources, time, and language and literacy skills necessary to perform this role, many parents do not.

Another fairly consistent message we found was that family literacy programs can enhance the quality of life for participants. In some instances, the claims were explicit such as, "Family literacy programs also encourage and create a positive attitude toward lifelong learning within the entire family," and "Reading together provides opportunities for positive interaction and opens the door to discussion and communication." In other cases, the message was much more subtle. Interestingly, in their highly regarded metaanalysis of the effects of storybook reading with young children, Scarborough and Dobrich (1994) concluded that in some families the opposite was true, and indeed storybook reading was a source of tension and conflict. They elaborated upon the "broccoli effect in reading" wherein parents forced their young children into shared book reading even when they resisted it strongly, just as they forced their children to eat broccoli, even if the child resisted, in the belief that "it is good for you!"

Although there is some evidence that family literacy programs can positively impact young children's language (e.g., St. Clair & Jackson, 2006) and literacy development (e.g., Brooks, Gorman, Harman, Hutchison, & Wilkin, 1996), one of the issues identified in the literature has been the lack of empirical evidence as to their long-term effect (Phillips & Sample, 2005). A fundamental assumption of many family literacy programs, however, is that they improve achievement in school. This premise was implicit in most of the sites we examined and explicit in others. For example, one program suggested, "Supported by easy-to-use activity packets, bi-weekly home visits, and group meetings, HIPPY parents learn how to prepare their children for success in school and beyond." The lack of longitudinal evidence notwithstanding, another proclaimed "Family literacy can have a big effect on how well children do in school."

Auerbach (1995) asserted that while many programs claim to be based on the notion of building on family strengths, many pay only lip service to what families bring to the programs and actually reflect a deficit orientation. Approximately one quarter of the programs we examined stated what appears to be genuine concern for recognizing and building on the literacy practices of families and communities. And consistent with what Auerbach explained, some programs stated that they build on family strengths, and in literally the same sentence identified the people with whom they work in deficit terms such as "at risk."[1]

In summation, inherent in many of the texts was the notion that parents need to be taught how to value and to engage in literacy, while simultaneously, and somewhat ironically, the notion that parents are the child's first and most

important teacher was promoted. Some sites identify "at risk" families and suggest that such families lack confidence. Many family literacy programs implied that they will enhance school success and the quality of family life, even though there is a relative dearth of empirical evidence to support these claims. Finally, some programs were based on the philosophy of building on family strengths and building capacity based on the needs and aspirations identified by families and communities.

Messages About Literacy

The second research question asked, "What messages about literacy are being conveyed in the texts on family literacy websites?" We first report on the themes clustered under Forms of Literacy.

Table 3. Forms of Literacy, *n* = 48

Themes	Frequency
Genre (e.g., stories, rhymes, songs)	24
Skills (e.g., acquisition of school-like reading behaviors such as alphabet recognition, phonemic awareness, decoding, numeracy)	15
Strands (e.g., speaking, reading, writing, viewing, representing)	38

Forms of Literacy

Given the importance afforded to narrative in working with young children, it is perhaps not surprising that "story" was pervasive when we examined genres named on the websites. Likewise, many sites also identified "rhymes" and "songs." Although spread more sporadically across the texts examined, a fairly wide array of genres were evident, including: newspapers, shopping lists, letters, board games, cookbooks, recipes, passports, journals, and so forth.

Many of the sites mentioned "literacy skills," and to a lesser extent, "numeracy" or number skills. However, as is evident in Table 3, relatively few identified specific skills including letter and number recognition, phonics, phonological awareness, and spelling. Although most of the programs emphasized working with preschool programs, it was noteworthy that only two identified "literacy concepts" as a goal for young children. Researchers in early literacy (e.g., Purcell-Gates, 1996) emphasize the importance of young children's acquiring fundamental concepts (e.g., that print carries meaning) in order to make sense of instruction in symbol-sound relationships and so on upon entry to school. Likewise, although many programs promoted rhyme and story, phonological (or phonemic) awareness was mentioned on only one website.

Despite protestations that "family literacy is not just about reading and writing," found on a number of sites, reading was the most frequent form or

strand of literacy identified. Writing was also found quite frequently. Some programs promoted a more eclectic notion of literacy and included singing, surfing the Internet, drama, crafts, art, and mathematics. So although theorists such as Kress (1997) posit that young children's meaning making is multimodal, reading and writing predominated here.

In terms of the types of literacy, then, story (or narrative) was the most prominent genre found on these sites. Although literacy skills were frequently mentioned, these were generally not identified. Reading and writing were the literacy strands most frequently named, although many programs proclaimed that family literacy entails more than reading and writing. The second cluster of themes we examined in order to answer the second research question we called Literacy Messages.

Table 4. Literacy Messages, *n* = 48

Themes	Frequency
Promotion (e.g., literacy needs to be promoted)	27
Relationships (e.g., literacy builds positive relationships)	17
Simplified (e.g., literacy is fun and/or pleasurable and/or easy)	17
Functionality (e.g., literacy is necessary to get things done; low literacy impairs ones ability to function in society)	12
Empowerment (e.g., literacy leads to empowerment; low literacy leads to shame and embarrassment)	22
Lifelong learning (e.g., literacy is connected to lifelong learning)	23
Early literacy (e.g., literacy must be developed early with parents providing role models and reading frequently to their children)	39

Literacy Messages

As is evident in Table 4, a fairly frequent message was that literacy needs to be promoted. Interestingly, many of those who avail themselves of family literacy programs, especially in Canada, do so because they believe that literacy is important for them and their children (e.g., see Phillips & Sample, 2005). This appears to be a case of "preaching to the choir," to use a colloquialism.

The notion that literacy (and especially reading) builds positive relationships within families was fairly common. For example, the goal of one program was to "promote reading and learning as valued family activities that encourage positive interactions and shared experiences." However, as Scarborough and Dobrich (1994) pointed out, shared reading can be a source of incredible tension within families as well-intentioned adults try to engage children who do not enjoy listening to others read. Related to this idea, we believe, is the notion that literacy (and again, particularly reading) is "fun." Recognizing that many adults and children struggle with acquiring literacy, we see this as a rather

simplified view of reading. About one third of the programs promoted this notion, as was the case with one program which stated that one of its objectives was to "promote reading as fun, pleasurable and entertaining." Ironically, some of these same programs indicated that they aim to support parents who have struggled with literacy.

Also prominent on the sites we examined were messages warning of the dire consequences of low literacy skills. Implicit (and sometimes explicit) was the idea that people who have not attained certain literacy levels are unable to function adequately in society. For example, one site stated, "The International Adult Literacy Survey (1995) concluded that approximately 44 percent of adults in British Columbia have difficulty reading and writing on a daily functional basis." Responding to similar hyperbole about the IALS contained in a newspaper editorial, Purcell-Gates (2005) commented, "In fact, the results indicate that virtually all Canadian adults do have the skills for everyday reading, depending on one's 'every-day' needs, of course." She continued, "Common sense can be a great help here. Do we really believe that almost half of the people we see over the course of a week can't read or write?" Furthermore, as we have consistently pointed out, there is very little evidence that family literacy programs are able to "break the cycle" of illiteracy, as some websites purported.

Given the negativity with which people with low literacy ability are sometimes portrayed, it is perhaps not surprising that literacy was portrayed as "empowering" on many family literacy websites. Typical were statements that literacy "enhances ones ability to participate more fully," "allows one to achieve one's goals," "enables one to achieve one's goals and develop one's knowledge and potential," and of course, "is empowering." As would be expected, we also found statements that programs empower participants, such as, "family literacy empowers people." As we read these texts, we were struck that accompanying this discourse about empowerment was a parallel discourse about "at risk," "needy," and "low-literacy" families. We wondered whether there is a subtext here that suggests that if these families would engage in the right kind of literacy practices, in the right amounts, and at the right time, all would be well.

A number of programs stated that one of their goals is to promote lifelong learning. Indeed, some programs made claims such as, "Family literacy programs also encourage and create a positive attitude toward lifelong learning within the entire family." As we pointed out before, the long terms effects of family literacy programs are generally unknown. Furthermore, as Mace (1997) argued, family literacy programs tend to ignore the learning and literacy needs of adults. As was reported earlier, we found virtually no mention of the needs of older children or adolescents. Instead, most programs focus on early literacy, the theme that we examine next.

Early literacy was the focus of virtually all of the sites we looked at in this study. Many of the programs identified preparing children for school or "readiness" as a primary goal. Some programs claimed to be based on "brain research" that emphasizes the importance of children having rich language and literacy experiences in the early years, suggesting that "the brain operates on a use it or lose it principle." Although some programs mentioned the importance of oral language and suggested talking with and listening to children, telling stories, singing songs, and reciting rhymes, reading books was by far the favored and most heavily promoted literacy activity. Luke and Luke (2001) proposed that family literacy and early literacy programs reflect the "inoculation principle" and are based on the assumption that early and intense intervention prevents later literacy (and, therefore, larger societal) problems. Indeed, this view is stated unequivocally on the *Read to Me!* website.

> Encouraging early childhood literacy could turn out to be our 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)

To summarize the literacy messages, some programs claimed that literacy enhances relationships, especially within families. Programs tended to portray literacy (and reading especially) as fun. The impression that people with low literacy abilities are not able to function was implied on many websites and explicit on others. Related to this, literacy was often referred to as empowering. The concept of lifelong learning was promoted, although ironically few programs addressed the needs of older children, youth and adolescents, or adults.

Promises/Consequences of Literacy

The third question was, "What promises about literacy are implied or explicitly stated on family literacy program websites?"

As discussed earlier, nearly all of the family programs whose websites we examined focused on early literacy. Inherent in most of the texts was the notion that the programs will give children a head start in literacy development and help them to be ready for school. However, some programs claimed long term effects, such as "Family literacy can have a big effect on how well children do in school." Others indicated that the impact was more far reaching, claiming that reading to children has a "positive impact on their future academic skills," including "performing mathematical tasks." It is important to reiterate that

while there are indications that family literacy programs do make a difference in young children's literacy development (e.g., Brooks et al., 1996; St. Clair & Jackson, 2006), there is a dearth of research that examines their long term impact on children's academic progress.

Table 5. Promises/Consequences of Literacy, *n* = 48

Themes	Frequency
Academic (e.g., children will do better in school because of family literacy programs)	29
Financial (e.g., literacy is linked to financial success)	27
Personal/political (e.g., literacy allows one to participate fully in society)	25
Societal (e.g., family literacy will cure a number of societal ills)	30

As evidenced in the earlier quotation from the *Read to Me!* program, literacy was often promoted as the great equalizer in terms of distribution of financial resources. For example, one program stated, "Literacy is a pre-condition for getting access to the market, the pre-condition for getting economic independence." The logic behind many family literacy programs seemed to be that poor families are low-literate families, and by breaking the "cycle of illiteracy" through family literacy programming, the children will become literate and will be financially more successful. An anonymous respondent to a presentation at a recent national literacy conference bluntly expressed this position in a comment stating that the family literacy program just reported on had helped the families "pull themselves up by the bootstraps." However, in his classic historical analysis, Graff (1979) concluded that literacy does not level the playing field in terms of economic opportunity. Furthermore, as Brandt's historical analysis demonstrated, literacy demands change largely as a result of economic forces that shape the marketplace. As she elaborated,

> we have paid less attention to the effects of these economic changes on the status of literacy more broadly as it becomes integral to economic relations, and as it is pulled deeply into the engines of productivity and profit. What happens when literacy itself is capitalized as a productive force? And what impact does such investment have on the course of individual literacy learning? (Brandt, 2001, p. 171)

We wonder if family literacy program providers consider the shifting nature of literacy and the demands that families will encounter in these new times (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996).

Many of the programs promoted the idea that literacy is necessary in order for one to participate fully in society. For example, one site proclaimed that

literacy is "the pre-condition for being a full human being capable of making plans, executing them, and standing up for yourself when you get pushed around." Another asserted that "literacy is a universal human right which can give individuals the tools to more fully participate in the rights, responsibilities, and privileges of citizenship." As discussed earlier, the term *empowerment* was frequently employed with the implication that literacy leads to empowerment and that disenfranchised families will empower themselves and their children through their participation in family literacy programs. But as Purcell-Gates (1996) pointed out, some of the low-literate families in her study led productive, fulfilled lives, using literacy only minimally on a daily basis.

Claims about the potential of family literacy extend beyond the family; indeed, one can be left with the impression after reading these texts that family literacy is the solution to many of society's ills. The statement reported earlier from the *Read to me!* program, while perhaps an example of hyperbole in terms of claims about literacy, is a case in point. Many of the programs suggested that they strengthen communities, and they then forecast a better future.

To summarize, the explicit and implicit message in the texts we analyzed was that literacy is a panacea for many social and economic problems in our society. Furthermore, the family was portrayed as the site where these solutions originate. As Smythe (2006) and others have pointed out, many of the people for whom these programs say they are intended struggle at the margins of society, and the expectations generated by this discourse are onerous and, perhaps, quite unrealistic.

We, the three authors, have considerable experience working in family literacy programs and, indeed, are still heavily involved in several initiatives. Many of the parents and communities with whom we have worked have told us that they and their children have benefited from their participation (e.g., Anderson & Morrison, 2007). As practitioners, though, we were surprised at some of the claims being made on websites, for as we see it, the evidence is not yet in with regard to the long-term impact of family literacy programs. Like Auerbach (2005), we believe there is a need to temper considerably the claims we make about the power of family literacy programs. As she poignantly stated: "humility about what we can and cannot do is the key" (p. 378).

Concluding Thoughts

As we read and carefully examined the websites' texts, we were struck by the remarkable consistency among them. Canada represents a large geographical area with a population that is culturally and linguistically diverse. Although there are some minor variations, if we were to distill the messages in these texts,

it would be that family literacy is about parents reading books to young children to insure school readiness, which insures academic success and a healthy, productive, engaged life, which in turn leads to a more civil society.

It was beyond the scope of the present study to interview family literacy program providers to determine how they decide what messages to include online. A worthwhile follow-up study would be to trace the lineage of the ideas presented on these websites and to interview family literacy program providers as to how and why they decide to include and, therefore, promote the ideas and messages that they do. For example, who is the intended audience, what are the sources of the ideas and information that are presented, and what impact is anticipated or intended? Indeed, for what purposes has the website been constructed and posted?

It was also beyond the scope of this study to examine issues of readership. For example, we did not examine the volume of hits for the various websites because many of the sites did not have counters. Furthermore, we do not know who is actually reading and consulting these sites. Another valuable follow-up study would be to address these issues, and to ascertain if and how those who participate in family literacy programs access, perceive, and respond to the messages on these websites.

Some of the programs indicated that they are "evidence based" or that they reflect the latest research. However, seldom is any of the research cited or the source of the empirical evidence provided. Nearly all of the programs acknowledged that family literacy programs need to reflect the social contextual realities of the communities and families that the programs are intended to serve. However, the homogeneity across the sites suggests that this is not the case.

The Internet is increasingly becoming accessible to all segments of society. For example, survey data from 2005 revealed that 67.9% of Canadians accessed the Internet daily (Statistics Canada, 2005). Thus it is important that the messages we provide to families and family literacy program providers accurately reflect what we know about the many ways in which children's literacy can be supported within the context of the family and community. Families need to be conceptualized broadly and inclusively to reflect the reality of an increasingly global and diverse society. It is also important that texts and images convey congruent messages: this clearly appears not to be the case at present. And, finally, it is imperative that we have realistic perspectives of what family literacy programs can and cannot do.

Endnote

[1]We see such language ("at risk," single parents, and the like) as reflecting an essentialist perspective; as we see it families are complex phenomena and assuming that membership in a group somehow describes what families do, think, value, and so forth is faulty. Second, as Shirley Brice Heath and others remind us, there are often more differences within sociocultural groups than there are across them. Third, we have worked with parents who belong to some of the identified groups who provide their children with incredibly rich language, literacy, and learning experiences. Stacey Cody, a single parent in one of our programs is a case in point. Her story, published in *Portraits of Literacy Across Families, Communities and Schools: Intersections and Tensions* (Anderson, Kendrick, Rogers, & Smythe, 2005; also available at http://www.lerc.educ.ubc.ca/fac/anderson/pals/Cody.pdf), details this point. Finally, many of the middle class parents with whom we work (who are, supposedly, already doing the right kinds of literacy, in the correct way, in the proper amounts, at the right times) tell us they benefit enormously from participating in family literacy programs.

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