

Spring 2008

## Programming Family Literacy: Tensions and Directions

Kimberly Lenters

*University of Calgary*, [k.lenters@ucalgary.ca](mailto:k.lenters@ucalgary.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Lenters, Kimberly. "Programming Family Literacy: Tensions and Directions." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2008, pp. 3–22, doi:10.25148/clj.2.2.009489.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

# Programming Family Literacy: Tensions and Directions

Kimberly Lenters

This paper explores the following questions related to family literacy programs: How is family literacy linked with family literacy programs? What are the theoretical frameworks supporting the various models educators and researchers are using in their pedagogical approaches to family literacy programs? As these questions are explored several tensions and directions in programming family literacy become apparent. By examining the various models in this way, family literacy providers and others interested in family and community literacy may be better equipped to evaluate the underlying principles of the programs they use and thereby make informed choices with regard to programming.

---

The study of family literacy has gained tremendous momentum in the two decades since Denny Taylor first published *Family Literacy: Young Children Learning to Read and Write*. From an academic point of view, this development is part of the larger New Literacy Studies (Gee; Street “Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Literacy”; New London Group) beginning in the same time period, which recognized literacy as more than a set of skills required for academic purposes. In their discussion of theoretical traditions contributing to the examination of these out-of-school literacies, Schultz and Hull state, “It was, in fact, in these out-of-school contexts, rather than in school-based ones, that many of the major theoretical advances in the study of literacy have been made in the past 25 years. Studies of literacy out-of-school have been pivotal in shaping the field” (11). Indeed, the study of the family has significantly impacted our understanding of the richness and complexity of language and literacy in multilingual societies in out-of-school contexts. Politically, however, family literacy has been taken up in the back-to-basics discourse that seeks to settle the challenges of cultural and linguistic diversity accompanying globalization through a narrow definition of what counts as literacy (Luke). These distinct perspectives, representing a view of literacy as a social practice and literacy as a set of skills for reading and writing, have important implications for the way family literacy programs are implemented.

In this paper, I explore these implications by asking the following questions: What is family literacy? How is family literacy linked with family literacy programs? Which models of family literacy are educators and researchers using in their pedagogical approaches to family literacy programs? What are the tensions and directions of these different models? In asking

these questions, I hope to provide a means for family literacy providers and others interested in family and community literacy to evaluate the underlying principles of the programs they use and thereby make informed choices with regard to programming.

## Family Literacy: Description or Pedagogy?

In her review of family literacy research, Victoria Purcell-Gates (“Family Literacy”) distinguishes between two types of family literacy studies in the research literature: descriptive studies and pedagogical studies. Early studies in family literacy, beginning with Denny Taylor’s foundational work, *Family Literacy* were primarily ethnographic case studies that described the home literacy practices of young children and their families.

The findings of descriptive family literacy studies went on to be “appropriated by those whose purpose was to teach parents to incorporate mainstream literacy practices into their lives as a way of improving the academic performance of their children” (Purcell-Gates, “Family Literacy” 859). In this way, family literacy then came to be known as an instructional program aimed at parents and children. There are two major foci for these programs: one type of programming aims to help empower parents to help their children; and the other takes an intergenerational approach, looking to foster the literacy development of both parents and children (Handel). The documentation of the outcomes of these instructional programs is the subject of pedagogical family literacy research.

## Descriptive Family Literacy Studies

Ethnographic case studies beginning with Heath’s *Ways With Words*, Taylor’s *Family Literacy*, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines’ *Growing Up Literate* provided us with rich descriptions of the ways literacy is understood and enacted in the lives of families of diverse backgrounds. These studies were followed by others such as *Literacy for Empowerment* (Delgado-Gaitan), *Other People’s Words* (Purcell-Gates *Other People’s Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy*), and *Reading Families* (Compton-Lilly)—all case studies that provided us with an even deeper understanding of the role of literacy in diverse American families.

What do these case studies tell us about families and children’s literacy instruction? Together they remind us that sweeping statements cannot be made regarding social class, race, language and literate practice. However, as I suggested in the introduction to this paper, not everyone has interpreted these findings in this manner. Purcell-Gates notes that findings from these studies were also taken up as the basis for pedagogical programs for the delivery of literacy instruction to families whose literacy practices differed from the mainstream literacy practices on which public school systems in western nations base instruction (“Family Literacy”). In many cases, as I shall point out, the results of some of these case studies were taken up in a manner unintended by their authors. In North America, the United Kingdom and Australia, we predominantly see pedagogical family literacy programs that are

aimed at families with pre-school and school-aged children who come from linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds that fall outside of the English-speaking, white, middle-class “mainstream.”

## **Pedagogical Approaches to Family Literacy**

In the following section, I present three models of family literacy pedagogy to illustrate different beliefs and assumptions about families and literacy. Auerbach describes three models for pedagogical approaches to family literacy: the intervention-prevention approach; the multiple-literacies approach; and the social change approach. In the research literature, several other typologies are applied to family literacy to delineate the range of models informing family literacy initiatives; however, for the purposes of this paper, I use Auerbach’s typology, as it most appropriately addresses the range and specificity of issues present in the family literacy literature.

### **The Intervention-Prevention Model**

All family literacy initiatives start with the assumption that the home is the child’s primary source of literacy learning (Purcell-Gates “Family Literacy”; Auerbach; Tizard, Schofield and Hewison; Taylor *Many Families*; Morrow). However, some program providers interpret this as an indication that children do not succeed in school because of apparently inadequate or non-existent literacy learning in the home. Programs subscribing to an intervention-prevention model are designed to compensate for this perceived problem (Auerbach). The intervention-prevention model has also been called a school-home transmission model (Auerbach) and the family influence model (Delgado-Gaitan). Programs based on an intervention-prevention model are generally informed by three sets of beliefs: a view of literacy as an autonomous practice (Street “The Meanings of Literacy”), the deficit theory (Coleman *Equality of Educational Opportunity: Report Submitted to the U.S. Department of Health*; 1987) and the literacy myth (Graff).

**Table 1: Theories Informing the Intervention-Prevention Model of Family Literacy**

Literacy Model	Social Theory	The Potential of Literacy
<p><b>Autonomous Model of Literacy (Street “Introduction: The New Literacy Studies”)</b></p> <p>Views literacy as a portable set of competencies or skills, which are separable from social context and therefore uniform across contexts Views orality and literacy as two separate modes of communication</p>	<p><b>Deficit Notions of Family (e.g., Coleman <i>Equality of Educational Opportunity: Report Submitted to the U.S. Department of Health; Coleman “Families and Schools”</i>)</b></p> <p>Views children’s differential achievement in school as a result of their family background and not the manner in which the curriculum and instruction are delivered in school</p>	<p><b>Literacy as the great equalizer (see Graff <i>The Literacy Myth; Graff “The Legacies of Literacy”</i>)</b></p> <p>Literacy acquisition viewed as leading to greater equality for marginalized or low socio-economic groups</p> <p>Maintains that literacy had a significant impact on the historical development of thought and social processes (Goody and Watt; Ong)</p>

How would the theories informing an intervention-prevention model of family literacy define family literacy pedagogy? The autonomous model of literacy, the deficit theory and the literacy myth combine to advance the notion that literacy difficulty and the resultant economic woes that plague western nations result from undereducated parents who are unable to promote literacy in their homes. While much of the research related to this model contends that school achievement is contingent upon academic success fostered by supportive family environments, it also makes the assumption that what parents in non-mainstream homes are doing is insufficient to help children achieve success in school (Delgado-Gaitan). The research assumes that lack of parental participation in education may stem from a value system that does not emphasize education (Valdes). It also assumes that the best way to “fix” this “problem” is through a transmission of skills, from the school to the home. In this line of thinking, the skills of literacy may be transplanted from schools to homes and the acquisition of this bundle of competencies will enable parents to prepare their young children for school discourse.

## Tensions and Directions of the Intervention-Prevention Model

The manner in which successful language and literacy acquisition is equated with the culture of schooling and mainstream literacy practices inherent to the prevention-intervention model is not supported in the research literature. For instance, Chall and Snow's work has shown that simple correlations cannot be made between parental literacy achievement, educational background, the amount of time parents spend on literacy work with their children, and their children's overall achievement in school. Many other factors are involved that point to building confidence and background knowledge as important aspects of literacy acquisition (Auerbach; Delgado-Gaitan). Additionally, as ethnographic case studies of family literacy have demonstrated, the early experiences with print that characterized the home life of proficient middle class readers in Taylor's study were "situationally diffuse, occurring at the very margins of awareness" (Taylor 100). Or as Leichter found, they take place "on a moment-to-moment basis, including both those processes that are deliberate, systematic, and sustained and those fleeting actions that take place at the margins of awareness" (39). In other words, much of the literacy "instruction" that middle class children receive is not intentionally taught. It is important to recognize that these studies demonstrate the complexities of early literacy learning: there is far more to preparing young children for success with literacy than the direct teaching of the alphabetic principle and the discourse associated with storybook reading. Many family literacy programs based on an intervention-prevention model, however, set out to inculcate such middle-class practices, failing to recognize that these practices are just one part of what takes place in these homes. Furthermore, as programs based on the intervention-prevention model take this action, they fail to recognize the kinds of literacy experiences that are already in place in many non-mainstream homes (e.g., McTavish).

Historically, programs utilizing an intervention-prevention model can be viewed as existing in two phases. First-wave family literacy programs based on an intervention-prevention model drew criticism with regard to their overt assimilative premises and the goals upon which they were built. Auerbach notes that in the late 1980s the hegemonic thrust of these early approaches was recognized and, therefore, in a new version of the intervention-prevention model, programs sought to recognize cultural differences in their approach to literacy instruction. However, as her critical analysis of the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) demonstrates, there has been little substantive change in many of these second generation intervention-prevention family literacy programs, particularly the many utilizing NCFL guidelines and funding. These programs, Auerbach contends, pay lip service to the importance of understanding cultural practices, but continue to reify middle-class values and work from a deficit mindset. She writes:

Where the traditional deficit model posits that educational problems are attributable to cognitive or cultural deficiencies of individuals or ethnic groups, NCFL

literature locates the source of the economic, educational, and social problems facing the nation squarely in the home (Auerbach 74).

In other words, educational disadvantage and its accompanying social and economic difficulties, originally construed by the intervention-prevention model as stemming from “cultural deficiencies,” are now viewed by many programs utilizing this model as educational disadvantage emanating from family “deficiencies.”

Concerns such as these are critically important in helping us to take stock of the tendency toward hegemony seen in intervention-prevention programs and the deficit orientation and narrow conception of literacy upon which many programs are founded. At the same time it is necessary to be cognizant of the concern that non-mainstream families often want the kind of instruction that gives them access to the language of power (Delpit) or that helps them to live in two parallel cultural worlds (Delpit; Hare). In fact, there is evidence of non-mainstream parents in large-scale, longitudinal studies becoming involved with family literacy programs because they wanted to learn how to read with their children in ways that would help their children to find success at school (Handel; Edwards). Programs modeled on an intervention-prevention philosophy attempt to provide this instruction.

Nonetheless, in an age of pluralism, assimilative practices such as those promoted by the intervention-prevention model are ripe for criticism. Developing a communicative repertoire, which ensures familiarity with dominant spoken and written language structures, may comprise one aspect of family literacy programs; however, it should not be the sole objective. This also begs the question: why should non-mainstream families have to be changed? Clearly, the need exists to find respectful ways for family literacy programs to include familial practices and understandings of literacy that differ from mainstream literacy practices upon which public schools are built. Perhaps family literacy programs should provide opportunity for mainstream educators to learn more about and benefit from communicative repertoires of the families with whom they work. Finally, the assumption that there is a straightforward relationship between literacy levels and economic and social well-being must continue to be questioned. It is necessary for family literacy programs to take a far more nuanced approach to understanding the correlation between poverty and low literacy rates than what we are currently seeing in most based on an intervention-prevention model. The next model considered in this paper, the multiple-literacies model, attempts to address many of these concerns.

## The Multiple-Literacies Model

A model is needed that encompasses the understanding that, “in relation to dominant forms of literacy, projects are not working with disadvantaged deficit communities but, on the contrary, communities which are at a disadvantage in relation to a monolingual hegemonic culture” (Crowther and Tett 209). The multiple-literacies model (Auerbach) embodies this quest to find a balance between providing familiarity with mainstream “ways with words” and respecting familial cultural

literacy practices. This model views the problem of literacy difficulties in non-mainstream families as one of cultural discontinuity. In this model, a disconnect between culturally variable home literacy practices and school literacies is seen as preventing students from achieving in school. The

solution offered within this model is to investigate, validate, and extend students’ multiple literacies and cultural resources (Auerbach), that is, to bring students’ home literacy practices into the school. This approach has also been termed a school-centered model because of its interest in the ways in which family and community practices may be utilized to strengthen school literacy practices (Bloome et al.).

Similarly, it has also been called a school reform model (Degado-Gaitan). The premise behind this model is that when educators work in step with the culture of the home, they can more effectively work with their students. The multiple-literacies model of family literacy is primarily informed by a cultural model of reading (Street “The Meanings of Literacy”), cultural discontinuity theory (Ogbu), and the theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu *Outline of a Theory of Practice*); see Table 2 for these models. I discuss work completed in the area of parental participation in schools in this section as it is frequently referenced by some family literacy pedagogical programs situated in the multiple-literacies model.

-----  
**Developing a communicative repertoire, which ensures familiarity with dominant spoken and written language structures, may comprise one aspect of family literacy programs; however, it should not be the sole objective.**  
 -----



**Table 2: Theories Informing the Multiple Literacies Model of Family Literacy**

Literacy Model	Social Theory	The Potential of Literacy
<p><b>Social approach to literacy (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic; Scribner and Cole)</b></p> <p>Literacy varies with social context</p> <p>The organization and doing of reading and writing is an extension of an individual’s daily cultural positioning and activity</p> <p><b>Cultural Model of Literacy (Street “The Meanings of Literacy”)</b></p> <p>Literacy is always value-laden and contextually situated</p> <p>Relationship between literacy and discourse focuses on identity, gender and belief</p> <p><b>Multiple Literacies (Street <i>Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography and Education</i>)</b></p> <p>Literacy is used for a variety of purposes, which are often culturally and linguistically influenced</p> <p>An individual is viewed as utilizing multiple literacies on a day to day basis depending on the task at hand</p>	<p><b>Cultural Discontinuity (Ogbu)</b></p> <p>Some minority groups recognize the cultural discontinuities existing between home and school and consciously choose to work within the mainstream system</p> <p>Some groups, consciously or unconsciously, resist assimilative efforts of the dominant society and therefore do not succeed in schools oriented to dominant groups</p> <p>Cultural Capital (Bourdieu)</p> <p>Through the family, a child acquires competencies in language and culture (cultural resources). These competencies are assigned a social value (cultural resources)</p> <p>Schools legitimize the knowledge forms and ways of speaking and relating associated with dominant or mainstream culture (cultural capital)</p>	<p><b>Literacy for the promotion of cultural understanding (Nieto)</b></p> <p>Literacy in general and literature in particular have the ability to promote understanding between different cultural groups and a society based on multiculturalism</p>

## Parental-Involvement Studies

It is necessary at this juncture to discuss Joyce Epstein's work on parent partnerships with schools because of its relationship to family literacy programs using the multiple-literacies model. Her typology of parental involvement begins with ways that schools can assist parents with child-rearing skills and then moves into ways of teaching families how to engage their children in learning activities at home (Epstein 43-44). She states that "families need better information about their children, the schools, and the part they play across the grades to influence children's well-being, learning and development" (39). With this notion that schools know more about their children than families do and that families have to be taught how to help their children, Epstein's insistence that she does not come from a deficit perspective becomes suspect. The framework on which she builds her typology is highly reminiscent of the deficit theory upon which the intervention-prevention model is based. Though not family literacy pedagogy per se, Epstein's work is referenced by some whose goal is to foreground parent input in family literacy programs (Cairney and Munsie; Handel). This is a curious inclusion given Epstein's understanding of the purposes of parental involvement with education.

Lareau's work on parent involvement is also frequently referenced by family literacy practitioners working from a multiple-literacies model. Addressing studies on parent involvement, such as Epstein's, Lareau contends that parent involvement research needs to be grounded in theory that does not acquiesce to deficit theories. This theory, she contends, also needs to be more robust than institutional differentiation theory, which contends that teachers treat parents in a differential manner according to socio-economic status (Becker and Epstein). Lareau argues that this may be accomplished by understanding parents' participation in schools through a lens of cultural capital (Bourdieu *Outline of a Theory of Practice*). Her descriptive study of white working class families found that parents of different social classes approached the family-school relationship differently. Though the educational values of the working-class and middle-class families in the study were very similar, the way in which the two groups promoted the educational success of their children was very different.

This finding challenges the cultural deficit theory. She found that working class families tended to place the authority for handling their children's education in the teacher's hands, whereas middle-class families were much more likely to monitor and supplement their children's education. For instance, though teachers made similar requests of parents from both working and middle-class parents in the study, the response rate of parents at the middle-class school was significantly higher than that of the working-class school. Lareau states that this study suggests "that the relationship between families and schools was *independent* in the working-class school and *interdependent* in the middle-class school" (79). This challenges the institutional differentiation theory. In spite of these differences, however, Lareau contends that schools

“held standardized views of the proper role of parents in schooling” (73) and did not adjust their approaches to be responsive to different families.

The multiple-literacies model, based upon a cultural model of reading, cultural discontinuity theories, and the theory of cultural capital, highlights the mandate that schools and family literacy programs have to recognize the differing sets of cultural resources brought to school by families. Lareau’s (1987) work highlights the need to recognize that those resources need to be activated in particular ways to become cultural capital and helps us move beyond the deficit theories on which other parent-partnership work is based. The multiple-literacies model would thus define family literacy pedagogy as a means of valuing and building upon families’ diverse literacy practices to provide a bridge that familiarizes them with the mainstream literacy practices of the school. The ultimate intent of such a program is for the children of the participating families to be successful in school.

### **Tensions and Directions of the Multiple-Literacies Model**

Programs based on this model, even those that do not subscribe to deficit theories, nonetheless have difficulties associated with them. One tension revolves around the content and delivery of programming. Is it even possible to turn cultural family practices into classroom activities and still honour their distinctiveness? Is there a way to avoid turning dynamic cultural literacy practices into stagnant, program-oriented, reproducible lessons? These are challenges for which I am not certain there is a solution. As Bloome et al. state, “family and community literacy practices are part of, and reflect, the cultural life of the family and community: engaging in family and community literacy practices eschews ‘pedagogization’” (155-156). However, being mindful of family practices when planning and delivering instruction is a helpful first step; including parents and children in planning the program is even more helpful.

In order to facilitate programming at multiple sites, some family literacy programs working within a multiple-literacies model use scripted program manuals. These programs continually run the risk of promoting an autonomous model of literacy as they attempt to take a program designed in one context and offer it in multiple contexts. When planning and delivering the content to be covered with families, family literacy program providers connected to regular school programs often struggle to maintain an awareness that it is often the school that needs to be changed and not always the families. It may be very easy for family literacy programs working within the multiple-literacies model to slide into the school-to-home transmission practice if the program becomes heavily focused on school literacy practices children “need to know” in order to be successful at school. Clearly, the slope between the multi-literacies model and the intervention-prevention model is slippery.

Finally, as Luke contests, employing a deeper understanding of Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital is essential when investigating literacy instruction with non-mainstream groups. Though families may have significant levels of cultural capital, without other forms of capital, such as social, economic,

and symbolic capital, the effect of literacy instruction is minimized. From this point of view, the difficulty for families without these forms of capital is greater than parents not knowing how to turn cultural resources into cultural capital, as Lareau suggests. Instead, the macro-level factors that make it difficult for them to acquire these forms of capital must also be considered. Similarly, even the positive exemplars of the multiple-literacies model do not address what they argue is at the heart of many children's school-related literacy difficulties: social inequity related to race, class and gender (Auerbach; Delgado-Gaitan; Valdes; Compton-Lilly). For this to occur, a model incorporating social transformation needs to inform family literacy pedagogical programs.

## The Social Change Model

A focus on parents' inadequacy, which characterizes the intervention-prevention model, too easily prevents family literacy practitioners from recognizing the material factors that lie behind literacy difficulties (Auerbach). In turn, the multiple-literacies model has been criticized for neglecting to address this critical issue by offering small solutions to complex problems (Valdes). A model that recognizes there are many issues related to the social context of living in poverty, which may prevent parents from participating effectively in their children's schooling, is needed. These issues include a lack of social, political, and economic support for parents dealing with concerns related to health, work schedules, and violence issues that put children at risk (Auerbach; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines; Hull and Schultz). For these reasons, a social change model (Auerbach), which stresses social transformation, has been developed. Alternatively, the social change model has been called a parent empowerment model (Delgado-Gaitan), which argues that the most important skills schools need to help parents acquire are social competence and social literacy (as opposed to a focus on skills). This includes helping them to become literate about school culture, classroom curriculum, and access to resources. It has also been termed a community-centered model (Bloome et al.).

Building upon and extending the multiple-literacies model, the social change approach looks at the multiple centres of literacy and cultural practice in a community (Bloome et al.) and aims "to increase the social significance of literacy in family life by incorporating community cultural forms and social issues into the content of literacy activities" (Auerbach 177). The social change model is primarily informed by an ideological model of literacy (Street "The Meanings of Literacy") and a resistance theory argument (Giroux), in addition to the theories informing the multiple-literacies model (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Theories Informing the Social Change Model of Family Literacy**

Literacy Model	Social Theory	The Potential of Literacy
<p><b>Ideological Model of Literacy (Collins and Blot; Street, <i>Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography, and Education</i>)</b></p> <p>Views literacy as value-laden and contextually situated but acknowledges that the meanings of literacy are always embedded in power relations</p> <p>Concentrates on the overlap between oral and literate modes of communication, rather than viewing them as separated processes</p>	<p><b>Resistance Theory (Giroux)</b></p> <p>By understanding power, resistance, and human agency educational institutions can further the cause of social justice</p> <p><b>Transformation Theory (Erickson)</b></p> <p>By creating empowering contexts in schools, coercive power relations at work in the social world in which the school is embedded may be challenged</p> <p>Culturally responsive pedagogy is one means of accomplishing this transformation</p>	<p><b>Literacy for empowerment (Freire)</b></p> <p>As they are provided with literacy instruction suited to their needs and encouraged to reflect critically on what they are learning, disempowered groups may benefit</p>

Taken together, the ideological model of literacy and the resistance theory argument inform the social change model by recognizing the difficulties non-mainstream families experience in school when their cultural resources and literate practices are unrecognized. As such, the social change model of family literacy recognizes that schools may be places of alienation for non-mainstream families who find the culture and practices of schooling to be foreign and bewildering. It tries to ameliorate the situation while affirming and strengthening the ability of these families to act for social change.

The social change model would thus define family literacy pedagogy as drawing on the tenets of the multiple-literacies model while playing a political role, such as providing a forum to help parents understand the school system, become empowered to challenge its assumptions and practices, and find ways to bring family multiple-literacies into their child’s classroom.

## Tensions and Directions of the Social Change Model

Clearly, the imperative exists to understand the wider issues that impact families and literacy learning, as the social change model sets out to do. However, as we've seen with the other models, with the social change model there is likewise a series of tensions, many of which are not easily resolved or cannot be resolved at all. These tensions vary and are particular to a local setting and community: for example, "the desire to maintain the culture (and language and literacy practices) of one's heritage while also wanting to participate fully in the dominant Anglo and middle-class culture with its demands for cultural assimilation" (Bloome et al. 156). Balancing these two worlds without feeling that they are betraying one or the other may be highly problematic for non-mainstream families; embracing one world too fully has consequences for their life in the other world. Similarly, another tension is seen in families wanting their children to achieve in school but not at the expense of becoming distanced from their family (Bloome et al. 156). This relates to the kinds of issues raised by Delpit: a fine balance has to be achieved between employing culturally responsive teaching pedagogy and providing the kind of instruction that will give non-mainstream students access to the codes of power.

Street's "Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Literacy," in a manner reminiscent of a Freirian approach, urges those involved in adult literacy campaigns to "start where people are at, to understand the cultural meanings and uses of literacy practices to build programmes and campaigns" (148). Additionally, he advocates for linking theory with "the experiences and insights of practitioners" (149). Though seemingly commonsense, this is an important balance for programs in a social change model to achieve. The concern here is that if family literacy programs take on a social change approach that is overly socially and politically oriented, they may miss out on teaching some of the skills of reading. When this happens and those participating do not receive all of the tools of literacy, an important aspect of the social justice this model hopes to achieve is lost. Programs based on the social change model require a multipronged approach in order to be beneficial to participants.

Most of the documentation of family literacy programs following a social change model describes the work undertaken with the adults in the program. For example, Tett and Crowther provide an excellent account of the adult portion of a program operating within a social change model. Through their description the reader learns of various activities that helped parents to gain confidence in the value of their own literacy practices and enabled them to participate more freely in their children's education. However, in this article, along with the vast of majority written about programs using a social change model, no information is given about the kinds of activities the children who come to these programs are engaged in. While it is not difficult to envision what incorporating community cultural forms into the content of young children's literacy activities, how does one include social issues in this programming? Future work in this area must describe the program as it is carried out with

all the participants in order to provide a concrete understanding of what a program based on a social-change model can do for all involved.

Finally, obtaining funding for programming may prove especially difficult if the trend toward using family literacy programs as welfare reform (Peyton, Wheeler and Dalton) continues. It may be equally difficult in places that view literacy as a means of facilitating the “self-service” opportunities for social services that the internet affords, as seen in Canadian government involvement in adult literacy initiatives (Ross; Hanselmann). In these situations,

**To a certain extent, all family literacy programs are interventionist in nature, for they are developed around the premise that something needs to be done to help non-mainstream families whose children traditionally struggle with school literacy.**

where literacy is viewed as a commodity (Graff), provision of family literacy funding is driven by the idea that economic development in an information age is dependent on an educated workforce. In this line of thinking, literacy has come to be equated with education; that is, to be educated is to have obtained

an arbitrarily determined level of reading proficiency. However, family literacy programs utilizing a social change model are messy and not easily evaluated for the purposes of this new accountability. Finding new methods of measuring growth are, therefore, necessary for these programs if they are to remain true to the principles of the social change model while working within a funding system that requires accountability. Examples of programs that have accomplished this task may be seen in Purcell-Gates, et al. for adult literacy instruction and in an ongoing, soon to be published, intergenerational literacy project in western Canada (Anderson and Purcell-Gates).

### **Implications of Using the Models to Inform Practice**

Family literacy pedagogical models have been categorized here as falling into three areas: the intervention-prevention model, the multiple-literacies model, and the social change model. It is important to note that within each model a range of approaches is represented and locating a program within a model may not be as simple as this three part categorization suggests. However, looking at these programs in this manner allows us to sort through the ideology supporting various programs and is, therefore, useful. Each of these models is built around particular conceptions of the nature of non-mainstream families and the nature of literacy. Running through each of these models is the notion of the importance of the home in children’s language and literacy development and the potential that tapping into family literacy may have for improving children’s educational future. The manner in which this concept of intergenerational learning is taken up by each model varies, however, in accordance with the beliefs and theories that inform that model.

To a certain extent, all family literacy programs are interventionist in nature, for they are developed around the premise that *something* needs to be done to help non-mainstream families whose children traditionally struggle with school literacy. However, the way in which the three models construct the families they serve provides the point of departure. An intervention-prevention model constructs participants as “broken” and in need of “fixing.” Whereas, the multiple-literacies and social change models start with the premise that participants are competent users of their own cultural and linguistic resources, who may benefit from being introduced to the mainstream cultural, language, and literacy practices around which schools are organized. Multiple-literacies and social change programs then set out to build upon participants own resources and, in the case of the social change model, develop the participants’ sense of agency, which would enable them to more easily engage the educational system on their child’s behalf. Thus, while all family literacy models are motivated by a perceived need to intervene, the intervention-prevention model is premised on assumptions to which, I argue, most practitioners involved with family literacy may not subscribe.

It is therefore very important for those involved with running family literacy programs to have an understanding of which model their pedagogy approximates. My own observation is that too often program providers adopt pedagogical models without fully thinking through the assumptions that lie behind those models. The following provides an example of one reason this may be happening.

Family literacy programs face many challenges in an educational climate that professes multiculturalism and social justice, as they must work within a larger political system that often seeks to implement restricted programs in the name of standardization and fiscal responsibility. Large amounts of government funding have been made available for family literacy programs over the last ten to fifteen years and the rush by those involved with family literacy to secure and utilize such funding may underlie the phenomenon of programs adopting practices they do not necessarily agree with. What often results are programs that espouse principles of the social change model but use the kinds of narrow measures of literacy ability, commonly associated with an intervention-prevention model. While such programs may be structured around the accountability requirements attached to the funding initiative, the mixed messages produced by dabbling in two fundamentally opposed models can only be harmful to the families these programs serve. This discord between core values and pedagogical practice is an issue with which everyone involved in family literacy, from funding agencies, to program developers, to those who teach must grapple. As noted earlier in the paper, this is an issue researchers must also confront as partnerships are developed within communities. I contend that understanding the pedagogical models of family literacy may be very helpful in this regard. In particular, understanding these models can give practitioners a stronger voice to resist pressures from funding agencies to implement programs based on a narrow vision of families and



literacy and, in turn, allow them to take an active role in developing broader measures of participant progress to meet accountability requirements.

In conclusion, when looking at family literacy pedagogy, one size cannot be selected to fit all. Neimeijer aptly discusses the heart of the matter:

As frameworks for guiding action, models can be valuable tools. The problem with a model occurs when it is too narrowly defined, particularly when the definition of the model does little more than offer service-delivery parameters. As a model becomes more and more prescriptive, it becomes a limiting structure rather than one enabling inventiveness, adaptability, and expansion (152).

Family literacy programs must arise out of the needs of particular communities and be shaped through the participation of those communities in conjunction with educators. The often narrowly focused and prescriptive nature of programs based on an intervention-prevention model thus precludes them from being a model appropriate in the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual milieu of western nations. Indeed, because of its inattention to critical issues, the multiple-literacies model, with its admirable intention of leading schools to better understand and incorporate the home culture of the children they teach, is also one that I see as inadequate. To achieve the goal of leading children and their families toward rich educational experiences, multiple paths that take into consideration the social futures of those families will need to be forged. With this in mind, a social change model of family literacy is truly the only one I can endorse. I offer this endorsement, however, with a caveat arising from the tensions and directions presented in the previous section: programs operating out of the social change model do not offer the ultimate panacea to the difficulties inherent to family literacy programming and have much to think about in order to maintain their viability into the future. Like the other models, programs using a social change model must also guard against becoming narrow and prescriptive.

It is critically important that those involved in family literacy initiatives examine these underlying principles, so that they are prepared to offer families the types of programs that will positively impact their social and material circumstances. It is equally important that those involved in family literacy research find ways to document the effectiveness of programs that embrace a social change model and that we find improved means to articulate to a wider audience the societal benefits of such programs.

## Works Cited

Anderson, Jim, and Victoria Purcell-Gates. *Intergenerational Literacy Program: A Proposal for the Development and Evaluation of a Pilot Program*. University of British Columbia, 2006.

- Auerbach, Elsa. "Reading Between the Lines." *Many Families, Many Literacies: An International Declaration of Principles*. Ed. D. Taylor. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997: 71-81.
- . "Toward a Social-Contextual Approach to Family Literacy." *Harvard Educational Review* 59.2 (1989): 165-81.
- Barton, David, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanic. *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Becker, Howard, and Joyce Epstein. "Parent Involvement: A Survey of Teacher Practices." *Elementary School Journal* 83 (1982): 85-102.
- Bloome, David, et al. "Interpellations of Family/Community and Classroom Literacy Practices." *Journal of Educational Research* 93.3 (2000): 155-63.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction." *Power and Ideology in Education*. Eds. J. Karabel and A.H. Halsey. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- . *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Cairney, Trevor, and Lynne Munsie. *Beyond Tokenism: Parents as Partners in Literacy*. Heinemann, 1995.
- Chall, Jeanne, and Catherine Snow. *Families and Literacy: The Contributions of out of School Experiences to Children's Acquisition of Literacy*. National Institute of Education, 1982.
- Coleman, James. *Equality of Educational Opportunity: Report Submitted to the U.S. Department of Health*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966.
- . "Families and Schools." *Educational Researcher* 16.6 (1987): 32-38.
- Collins, James, and Richard Blot. *Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Compton-Lilly, Catherine. *Reading Families: The Literate Lives of Urban Children*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003.
- Crowther, Jim, and Lyn Tett. "Literacies Not Literacy: Family, Culture and Curriculum." *Adults Learning* 8.8 (1997): 207-9.
- Delgado-Gaitan, Consuela. *Literacy for Empowerment: The Role of Parents in Children's Education*. New York: Falmer Press, 1990.
- Delpit, Lisa. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: New Press, 1995.
- Edwards, Patricia. "Combining Parents' and Teachers' Thoughts About Storybook Reading at Home and School." *Family Literacy: Connections in Schools and Communities*. Ed. L.M. Morrow. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1995: 54-69.
- Egan-Robertson, Ann, and David Bloome. *Students as Researchers of Culture and Language in Their Own Communities*. Eds. A. Egan-Robertson and D. Bloome. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 1998.
- Epstein, Joyce. *School, Family and Community Partnerships*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001.

- Erickson, Frederick. "Transformation and School Success: The Politics and Culture of Educational Achievement." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18 (1987): 335-56.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum Publishing, 1994.
- Gee, James. *Social Linguistics and Literacies*. 2nd ed. Exeter, UK: Taylor & Francis, 1996.
- Giroux, Henry. "Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education: A Critical Analysis." *Harvard Educational Review* 53.3 (1983): 257-93.
- Goody, Jack, and Ian P. Watt. "The Consequences of Literacy." *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 5 (1963): 304-45.
- Graff, Harvey. "The Legacies of Literacy." *Language and Literacy in Social Practice*. Ed. J. Maybin. Clevedon, U.K.: Open University, 1994: 151-67.
- . *The Literacy Myth*. New York: Academic Press, 1979.
- Handel, Ruth. *Building Family Literacy in an Urban Community*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1999.
- Hanselmann, Calvin. "Urban Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: Realities and Policies". 2001. Canada West Foundation. July 12 2006 <<http://www.cwf.ca/abcalcwf/>>.
- Hare, Jan. "To 'Know Papers': Aboriginal Perspectives on Literacy." *Portraits of Literacy across Families, Communities and Schools: Intersections and Tensions*. Eds. J. Anderson, et al. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2005.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Hull, Glynda, and Katherine Schultz. "Connecting Schools with Out-of-School Worlds: Insights from Recent Research on Literacy in Non-School Settings." *School's Out: Bridging out of School Literacies with Classroom Practices*. Eds. G. Hull and K. Schultz. New York: Teachers College Press, 2002: 32-57.
- Lareau, Annette. "Social Class Differences in Family-School Relationships: The Importance of Cultural Capital." *Sociology of Education* 60.1 (1987): 73-85.
- Leichter, Hope. "Families and Communities as Educators: Some Concepts of Relationship." *Families and Communities as Educators*. Ed. H.J. Leichter. New York: Teachers College Press, 1979: 3-94.
- Luke, Alan. "Literacy and the Other: A Sociological Approach to Literacy Research and Policy in Multilingual Societies." *Reading Research Quarterly* 38.1 (2003): 132-41.
- McTavish, Marianne. "Constructing the Big Picture: A Working Class Family Supports Their Daughter's Pathways to Literacy." *The Reading Teacher* 60.5 (2007): 476-85.

- Morrow, Lesley. "Family Literacy: New Perspectives, New Practices." *Family Literacy: Connections in Schools and Communities*. Ed. L.M. Morrow. Newark: International Reading Association, 1995: 5-10.
- New London Group. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." *Harvard Educational Review* 66.1 (1996): 60-92.
- Niemeijer, Theodora. "When Will the National Family Literacy Program Discussion Take Place? An Evaluator's Concerns." *Many Families, Many Literacies: An International Declaration of Principles*. Ed. D. Taylor. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997: 153-55.
- Nieto, Sonia. *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. White Plains, NY: Longman, 1992.
- Ogbu, James. "Cultural Discontinuities and Schooling." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 13.4 (1982): 290-307.
- Ong, Walter. "Writing Is a Technology That Restructures Thought." *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition*. Ed. G. Baumann. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986: 23-50.
- Peyton, Tony, Mary Gwen Wheeler, and Debbie Dalton. "States Can Use Family Literacy Programs to Support Welfare Reform Goals". 1998. *Employment and Social Services Policy Studies Division*. 25 Jan. 2008 <<http://www.nga.org/cda/files/060498LITERACY.pdf>>.
- Purcell-Gates, Victoria. "Family Literacy." *Handbook of Reading Research*, Vol. 3. Eds. M. Kamil, et al. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.
- . *Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Purcell-Gates, Victoria, Sophie Degener, Erik Jacobson, and Marta Soler. "Impact of Authentic Adult Literacy Instruction on Adult Literacy Practices." *Reading Research Quarterly* 37-1 (2002): 70-92.
- Rogers, Rebecca. *A Critical Discourse Analysis of Family Literacy Practices: Power in and out of Print*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2003.
- Ross, B. "Introduction to Presentation of Satya Brink's International Literacy and Skills Survey." Literacy BC. Vancouver, BC, 2006.
- Schultz, Katherine, and Glynda Hull. "Locating Literacy Theory in out-of-School Contexts." *Schools Out: Bridging out of School Literacies with Classroom Practices*. Eds. G. Hull and K. Schultz. New York: Teachers College Press, 2002: 11-31.
- Scollon, Ron, and Suzanne B.K. Scollon. *Narrative, Literacy, and Face in Interethnic Communication*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1981.
- Scribner, Sylvia, and Michael Cole. *The Psychology of Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981.
- Slavin, Robert, et al. "Success for All: First-Year Outcomes of a Comprehensive Plan for Reforming Urban Education." *American Educational Research Journal* 27.2 (1990): 255-78.
- Snow, Catherine. *Unfulfilled Expectations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

- Street, Brian. "Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Literacy." *Language and Literacy in Social Practice*. Ed. J. Maybin. Clevedon, UK: Open University, 1994: 139-50.
- . "Family Literacy and the Politics of Literacy." *Many Families, Many Literacies: An International Declaration of Principles*. Ed. D. Taylor. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997: 207-10.
- . "Introduction: The New Literacy Studies." *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*. Ed. B.V. Street. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1993: 1-21.
- . "The Meanings of Literacy." *Literacy: An International Handbook*. Eds. D.A. Wagner, R.L. Venezky and B.V. Street. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999: 34-39.
- . *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography, and Education*. New York: Longman, 1995.
- Street, Brian, and Joanna Street. "The Schooling of Literacy." *Writing in the Community*. Eds. D. Barton and R. Ivanic. London: Sage, 1991: 143-66.
- Taylor, Barbara, et al. "Reading Growth in High-Poverty Classrooms: The Influence of Teacher Practices That Encourage Cognitive Engagement in Literacy Learning." *The Elementary School Journal* 104.1 (2003): 3-28.
- Taylor, Denny. *Family Literacy: Young Children Learning to Read and Write*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann, 1983.
- . *Many Families, Many Literacies: An International Declaration of Principles*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997.
- Taylor, Denny, and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines. *Growing up Literate: Learning from Inner-City Families*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988.
- Tett, Lyn, and Jim Crowther. "Families at a Disadvantage: Class, Culture and Literacies." *British Educational Research* 24 (1998): 449-61.
- Tizard, J., W.N. Schofield, and J. Hewison. "Collaboration between Teachers and Parents in Assisting Children's Reading." *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 52 (1982): 1-11.
- Valdes, Guadalupe. *Con Respeto: Bridging the Distances between Culturally Diverse Families and Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996.

---

Kimberly Lenters is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. In addition to being an instructor in a family literacy program, her research interests focus on the literacy practices of non-mainstream students and the ways in which sociocultural understandings of literacy development may be utilized to strengthen the literacy development of students who struggle in mainstream schools.