Rhetoric and Research in Family Literacy

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ABSTRACT   *The term 'family literacy' now figures prominently in the discourses of early childhood education, literacy and adult education in several English speaking countries. It can refer to a focus for research or to a kind of educational programme. This article distinguishes family literacy programmes which combine adult basic education for parents with early literacy education and parental involvement from other kinds of family literacy programmes and terms the former 'restricted' programmes. The rhetoric concerning restricted programmes, and relevant research, is examined in relation to five issues: the usage of the term 'family literacy'; the targeting of restricted programmes for selected families; the accessibility and take-up of such programmes; their educational effects; and their socio-economic effects. Drawing on evidence from Britain and the USA, it is argued that, although rhetoric has sometimes been informed by research, it has also obscured, misinterpreted, ignored and exaggerated research findings. Some implications for policy, practice and research are identified.*

The term 'family literacy' now figures prominently in the discourses of early childhood education, literacy and adult education, in several English-speaking countries. In this article I wish to draw attention to some strands of the rhetoric of family literacy. By 'rhetoric' is meant discourse largely 'calculated to persuade or influence others' (the 'others' here being policy-makers, educators, and citizens with some interest in education). Examining the rhetoric of family literacy means examining explicit and implicit claims for certain programmes. I also wish to explore how those claims relate to educational research and hope to show that, although rhetoric has sometimes been informed by research, it has also obscured, misinterpreted, ignored and exaggerated research findings. Although many studies will be described or quoted, the purpose of this article is not to provide a review of the field but to show through examples that there is a rhetoric and to seek research evidence for claims made within that rhetoric.

The focus is on what will be termed 'restricted' programmes in family literacy. To explain what is meant by this it is necessary to review the use of the term 'family literacy'. Ten years ago it was not much used or known in education. It had some currency within a relatively small circle of literacy researchers who were interested in

young children's literacy development before school and out of school. Taylor (1983) in the USA had coined the term to refer to the interplay of literacy activities of children, parents and others which she found in six families studied over periods ranging from months to years. She concluded that 'literacy is a part of the very fabric of family life' (p. 87). There were other studies around the same time (e.g. Heath, 1983; Teale, 1986) which took a similar sociocultural approach to understanding literacy development in communities and families, although they did not use the term 'family literacy'.

Later in the 1980s in the USA, 'family literacy' acquired a different meaning, referring not to a *research focus* but instead to *educational programmes*. This meaning subsequently reached Britain and other English-speaking countries. Two main concepts of family literacy programmes can be distinguished from that period.

The first, broad concept of family literacy programmes included any approach which explicitly addressed the family dimension in literacy learning, e.g. parental involvement in schools, pre-school interventions, parenting education, family use of libraries, community development, and extensions of adult literacy education to include children (McIvor, 1990; Nickse, 1990b). In terms suggested by Nickse (1990b), some of these programmes focused directly on children and only indirectly, if at all, on parents as literacy learners. Others focused on parents and only indirectly on children. What they all had in common, however, was a recognition that individual literacy learners were members of families, and that families affected, and were affected by, the individuals' learning. When the focus was on children this usually meant parental involvement in children's learning.

This broad concept has been reflected in publications from the International Reading Association, detailing schemes across the USA in the early 1990s (Morrow, 1995; Morrow *et al.*, 1995). Wolfendale & Topping (1996) adopted a similar perspective in their compilation and review of developments in Britain, Australia and New Zealand. In this sense family literacy programmes have been around for two or more decades but the new descriptor 'family literacy' is more inclusive and useful than, say, 'parental involvement', which tends to convey the idea that parents are the only members of a family worth involving in children's literacy development. 'Family literacy' can also convey the idea that there is pre-existing literacy activity in families, that older family members may be engaging children in those activities (and vice versa), and that in practice most programmes often do not deal with isolated individuals but with members of a family.

The second concept of family literacy programmes referred to programmes which combined direct adult basic education for parents with direct early childhood education for children, i.e. where there was a dual, simultaneous focus on two generations. Often these programmes also sought to change how parents interacted with their children and supported their literacy development. A prime example was the 'Kenan model', promoted with great vigour by the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), established for that purpose in Louisville, Kentucky (Perkins & Mendel, 1989). Thus, Sharon Darling, president and founder of the NCFL, defined family literacy in these terms:

> At NCFL we prefer to define family literacy as a holistic, family-focused approach, targeting at-risk parents and children with intensive, frequent, and long-term educational and other services. Total family literacy programs include four components which are integrated to form a unique, comprehensive approach to serving families: (1) basic skill instruction for parents or

caregivers, (2) preschool or literacy education for young children, (3) regular parent and child interaction, and (4) parent education/support activities. (Darling, 1993a, p. 3)

This concept of a 'family literacy' programme (developed by others as well as the NCFL) was basically new. Several years later there is still no commonly accepted term by which it can be distinguished from the 'broad' concept of family literacy programme described earlier. Not being able to draw this distinction makes for difficulties in discussing family literacy programmes because it may not be clear which kind of programme is being referred to, and what is said about one kind may not apply to the other. It is at this point that issues of rhetoric arise, for the choice of term can itself be an act of persuasion. Darling, in the quotation cited earlier, used the word 'total', which implies that other kinds of programme are 'partial'—something less than the real thing. It is not easy to find a term which is neutral and accurate ('combined', for example, will not do because most family literacy programmes combine different components). For the purposes of this article I choose to use the term 'restricted'. This might be regarded as having somewhat negative connotations but that may be no bad thing if it offers an alternative rhetoric to that to be described later. 'Restricted' is an accurate term because the programmes concerned are restricted to families who participate in *all* components and because the programmes constitute a restricted subset of family literacy programmes in general. It is not suggested here that the family literacy addressed in such programmes is restricted (it may or may not be) but that the programmes are restricted in the sense of setting very specific entry requirements for families. The rhetoric to be discussed in this article relates mainly to restricted programmes.

Most of the rhetoric associated with restricted programmes is found in the USA but echoes of it can be detected in other countries, including Britain where, in 1993, the government-funded Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU, since renamed the Basic Skills Agency, BSA) launched a family literacy initiative which promoted restricted programmes. Demonstration programmes funded in this initiative had to provide '1. accredited basic skills instruction for parents; 2. early literacy development for young children; 3. joint parent/child sessions on supporting pre-reading, early reading and reading skills' (ALBSU, 1993a, p. 4). The similarity of the ALBSU concept to that of the NCFL, quoted earlier, was later acknowledged.

> In developing this model we looked at the development of family literacy in the United States and tried to learn from the best of what was going on in the US as well as avoid less effective practices. (BSA, 1996, p. 3)

From the start, family literacy programmes, particularly restricted ones, had an uneasy relationship with family literacy research. Programmes and research studies both acknowledged the importance of the family as a site for literacy activities and literacy learning but, as Auerbach (1989) pointed out, the assumptions underpinning programmes were often at odds with research findings. For example, according to family literacy research, very few, if any, families could be said totally to lack literacy or concern for children's development and education yet some programmes appeared to be premised on such beliefs. Auerbach noted 'a gap between research and implementation: existing models for family literacy programs seemed not to be informed by ethnographic research' (Auerbach, 1989, p. 167).

Throughout the 1990s, the term 'family literacy' became steadily more familiar to policy-makers and practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic in discourse about literacy education, standards of literacy, and teaching methods. In part this was due to

government funding of restricted programmes (in the USA, the Federal 'Even Start' programme; in England and Wales, the ALBSU/BSA Family Literacy Initiative). In part it reflected the development of broader forms of practice at local level (Hannon, 1995; Morrow, 1995; Wolfendale & Topping, 1996). There may also have been deeper cultural currents in this period—relating to anxieties about national literacy levels and the position of families in society—which made programmes labelled 'family literacy' particularly attractive to policy-makers and funders. Whatever the reasons, the result is that 'family literacy' has figured prominently in educational discourse, for example, in special issues of journals (*Language Arts*, 1993; *Journal of Reading*, 1995; *RaPAL Bulletin*, 1994; *Reading*, 1995; *Reading and Writing Quarterly*, 1995; *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 1994; *The Reading Teacher* 1995; *Viewpoints*, 1993), in special conferences, in numerous references in broadcast and print media, and in government documents such as the National Literacy Act (P.L. 102–73) 1991 in the USA or the Education White Paper for England, *Excellence in Schools* (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1997).

There have been many criticisms concerning the alleged 'deficit view' of families implicit in some family literacy rhetoric (a collection of such criticisms, and alternative conceptions of families' literacies, has been assembled by Taylor [1997]). In this regard Auerbach (1997) and Grant (1997) have examined specific claims and myths in family literacy in the USA and Australia. There is no need to go over the same ground in this article. Instead, other features of family literacy rhetoric which are no less important but which have not received equal attention will be examined. The examination relates to two countries, the USA and Britain, and focuses on five areas: (1) usage of the term 'family literacy'; (2) targeting of programmes for selected families; (3) accessibility and take-up of programmes; (4) educational effects; and (5) socio-economic effects. In respect of rhetoric in each area, one can ask, 'How does this relate to research?' The article concludes with a discussion of what research is needed to develop practice and policy in this field.

(1) Usage of the Term 'Family Literacy'

Earlier, a distinction was made between 'family literacy' as a term which referred to a research focus and as a term which referred to certain forms of educational programmes. The former meaning came first historically but has now been almost entirely obliterated by the latter. For example, notice in the earlier quotation, from Darling, that she says, 'we prefer to define family literacy as a holistic, family focused approach, targeting at-risk parents and children'. 'Family literacy' is now commonly used to refer only to programmes—as shorthand for 'family literacy programme'. Sometimes it is only restricted programmes that are referred to as if there were no other kind. Such are the resonances of the words 'family' and 'literacy' at the present time that it is a great rhetorical advantage for politicians and advocates of certain kinds of programmes to be able to refer them simply as 'family literacy'. The rightness and merit of such programmes for funding seems irresistible.

This has two consequences. First, the vocabulary of educational research is weakened by the loss of a term which defined a valuable line of research thus rendered less visible. It should be noted, however, that such research has continued. In the USA, following the work by Taylor, Heath and Teale mentioned earlier, there have, for example, been studies of families' literacies by Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines (1988), Baker *et al.* (1994), Purcell-Gates (1995) and Voss (1996). In Britain, Weinberger (1996), Gregory (1996),

and Barton & Hamilton (1998) have illuminated aspects of family literacy in different communities. This line of research has become obscured by discourse in which family literacy research means research into family literacy programmes.

A second consequence is that, as this line of family literacy research is obscured, it becomes more difficult for practitioners and policy-makers to draw on it to develop family literacy programmes. If 'family literacy' always refers to programmes it is harder to conceive of it as something which could occur independently of programmes. The situation lamented by Auerbach (1989) is in danger of getting worse. Auerbach (1995) has gone on to suggest that there is a continuum of programmes from those which ignore pre-existing family literacy to those which see the social context as a rich resource that can inform rather than impede learning. The former, she argues, are inevitably prescriptive and interventionist; the latter can be participatory and empowering. It does seem likely that programme developers who remain ignorant of existing patterns of family literacy will work at one end of the continuum without being fully aware of possibilities at the other end. The rhetorical restriction of the term 'family literacy' just to programmes devalues research which could inform those programmes.

(2) Targeting of Programmes for Selected Families

Crucial to the rhetoric of restricted programmes is the claim that there is a significant number of families in which parents have literacy difficulties and in which children also have (or will later have) low literacy achievement. That is the justification for restricting programmes to families willing to address both parental and child literacy simultaneously. Although it is undoubtedly the case that there are families in which parents have literacy difficulties and that there are families in which children have low literacy achievement, it is necessary to ask how many of each kind there are, and to what extent they are the *same* families. There is likely to be some overlap between the two kinds of family but it is often implied that they coincide completely and constitute a large number which ought to be selected as the target of family literacy programmes.

The rhetoric asserts (a) that parents with literacy difficulties will have low achieving children, and (b) that low achieving children have parents with literacy difficulties. Obviously, (a) and (b) are logically distinct propositions but they are often taken together as if each entailed the other. It is claimed that children can be identified as at risk of literacy underachievement on the basis of parental literacy difficulties. The parents' literacy, or lack of it, is put forward as a *cause* of the children's difficulties. The literature on family literacy abounds with references to a 'cycle of underachievement' which can be broken by targeting parents' and children's literacy at the same time in the same programme.

Examples of this rhetoric from the USA are provided by Darling (1993b) and Nickse (1990a).

> Family literacy programs recognise that these two groups—undereducated adults and educationally 'at risk children' interlock; they are bound so tightly together that excellence in public school education is an empty dream for youths who go home each afternoon to families where literacy is neither practised or valued. (Darling, 1993b, p. 2)

> The goal of family literacy programs is to enhance the lives of both parent and child: to improve skills, attitudes, values, and behaviors linked to reading.

TABLE I. Relation between children's reading achievement and parents' reported reading difficulties as presented by ALBSU (1993)

| | Parent reading difficulty? | |
| | Yes | No |
Child's reading test score	%	%
1. Low	48	24
2.	22	25
3.	17	25
4. High	13	26
n (100%)	107	2500

Source: ALBSU (1993c), Table 1, p. 10.

These programs try to break the cycle of low literacy, a cycle which limits lives. (Nickse, 1990a, p. 4)

This powerful intervention holds great promise for breaking the intergenerational cycle of undereducation and fulfilling America's broadest educational aims. (Darling, 1993b, p. 5)

In Britain ALBSU echoed these claims.

Programmes which offer a combination of teaching for parents and children can prevent failure, break the cycle of under attainment and raise confidence and achievement across the generations. (ALBSU, 1993b, p. 1)

Gillian Shephard, a former Secretary of State for Education in England, has stated:

Family literacy schemes break the vicious circle where parents pass on poor literacy and numeracy to their children. (Department for Education, 1995)

There is a surface plausibility about the assumptions underlying these statements but how well do they relate to research evidence? Do children who achieve poorly in school in fact have parents with literacy difficulties? Can parental literacy difficulties be used to identify children likely to fail and for whom a family literacy programme would be appropriate?

To answer these questions one needs to survey a representative sample of families and examine the association between parents' and children's literacy. Such a study has been carried out in Britain. It has been cited in support of the earlier claims but when examined closely it can be seen that it actually contradicts them.

The research in question was carried out in 1991 for ALBSU by a team from the City University, London. Using a subsample of 1761 families with 2617 children drawn from the fifth sweep of the British National Child Development Study, children's reading was tested on the Peabody Individual Achievement Test Reading Recognition Assessment and parents were asked as part of a longer interview whether they had problems with reading, writing or spelling (ALBSU, 1993c). Data were also collected on other family characteristics and children's attainment in mathematics.

Children's reading achievement was categorised in four levels, 1–4, according to quartiles of age-standardised scores. Table I shows some of the findings as presented by ALBSU (1993c). It can be seen from Table I that there was a clear association between children's reading test scores and parents' reported reading difficulty. It is particularly

TABLE II. Data from Table I expressed in terms of inferred numbers of children

| | Parent reading difficulty? | | |
Child's reading test score	Yes	No	Totals
Low	51	600	651
Other	56	1900	1956
Totals	107	2500	2607

Source: Derived from ALBSU (1993c), Table 1, p. 10.

interesting that 48% of the children whose parents had reading difficulties were in the 'low' reading group (compared to 24% from other families). One can agree with the Director of ALBSU, Alan Wells, who claimed that the study provided 'the first objective evidence of the link between a parent's competence in basic skills and the competence of their children' and that it indicated 'a very strong correlation between low basic skills of parents and low attainment of children' (Wells, 1993, p. 3). Correlation, however, is one thing, identification quite another.

Further analyses in the ALBSU study showed that in low income families and in families where parents had no educational qualifications as well as reading difficulties the proportion of low reading children rose to 72%. The proportion of children who were low in either mathematics or reading in such families was 76%. The study concluded:

> The combination of parental literacy and numeracy problems, with a low level of parental education or low family income, *can be used to identify the children who were most likely to perform badly* in the maths and reading tests. (ALBSU, 1993c, p. 19, emphasis added)

This statement is highly misleading. The fact that certain parental characteristics are associated with children's low reading achievement does not mean that they can be used to identify those children. To understand why, return to Table I. Data were presented there by ALBSU (1993c) in a manner likely to persuade—perhaps even calculated to persuade—that parental literacy difficulties account for much of children's poor literacy achievement, but if the data are recast in the form of Table II it can be seen that this is not so. In Table II children in the higher three quartiles on reading test scores have been grouped together as 'other' to clarify comparisons with the 'low' group and instead of percentages there are the inferred numbers of children in each cell (calculated by reference to the cell percentages and column totals given in Table I). The figures in Table II were directly inferred from Table I although they were never presented in this form by ALBSU.

It can be seen from Table II that 51 out of the 107 children whose parents had reading difficulties were in the low reading group (this is the 48% referred to earlier) but the table also enables a judgement to be made of the value of parental reading difficulty as a method for identifying children with low reading. It shows that it is very insensitive for it only identifies 8% (51 out of 651) of the low reading group. Any programme targeted on this basis would miss 92% of the lowest achieving children. Almost as bad is the fact that 52% (56 out of 107) of the children identified would be in the higher reading achievement groups and would be targeted for a programme they might not need with a consequent waste of educational resources and the families' time.

TABLE III. Inferred numbers of children with low scores in reading or mathematics according to parental characteristics

Child's test score in reading or mathematics	Parent reading difficulty, low income and no qualifications?		
	Yes	No	Totals
Low in either	22	921	943
Other	7	1669	1676
Totals	29	2590	2619

Source: Derived from ALBSU (1993c), Table 8, p. 18.

It might be argued that the method of identification could be improved by adding identifiers of low family income and parents' lack of qualifications and combining them to identify children whose achievement was low in either mathematics or reading (as described by ALBSU, 1993c, in the quotation given earlier). Table III shows the relevant figures, derived from another table in the ALBSU report (as before, the cell figures were calculated by reference to the percentages and column totals given in the report). Data were not presented in this form by ALBSU but it can be seen that the 76% of children mentioned earlier (as having parents with reading difficulties, low income and no qualifications who were in the low reading group) comprised 22 out of 29 children.

Table III reveals that the sensitivity of this method is now absurdly low in that it identifies only 2% of all the children in the low reading group. It should also be noted that the target group, comprising 29 out of 2619 children, is only 1% of the population. The best that can be said for this as a method of identification is that it does not falsely identify as low achievers quite so many of the children in the higher groups as did the previous method (24% of those identified being false positives compared to 52% previously).

The rhetoric that family factors identify poor readers is therefore not borne out by this research. There is an overlap between families where parents have literacy difficulties and families where children have low literacy achievement but it is an extremely small overlap. Targeting just those families will not meet the needs of many others.

Might other studies, using different measures and different populations, find better methods of identification? Possibly, but the examination of this particular study highlights pitfalls likely to be encountered by research in any country which seeks to identify children with low literacy achievement on the basis of family characteristics. One is the tendency to believe that a significant correlation implies an acceptable method of identification. It has been shown that this does not necessarily follow. Another is that the prevalence of reported literacy difficulties in families is relatively low in countries such as the USA or Britain. If one devised a broader concept of parental literacy difficulty with higher prevalence one could expect to identify a greater proportion of children who were poor readers but the proportion of better readers falsely identified could also rise.

The search for methods of identification is often driven by policy-makers' wish for the 'magic bullet' which, targeted selectively at a few families, eliminates social problems. There is no evidence that targeting restricted programmes on the basis of parental literacy difficulty can be sufficiently accurate. One policy alternative to restricted programmes is universal, literacy-oriented early childhood education (including pre-school education). This could include ongoing assessment of children's literacy learning, accompanied by appropriate intervention as and when needed. Such early literacy

education could seek to include parental involvement and provide opportunities for adults to develop their literacy too if they wanted to. There would in effect be a broad range of family literacy programmes within which restricted programmes would be just one variety. This would be a larger scale, more expensive option than a policy of providing restricted programmes, which claims to achieve the same with less resources.

(3) Accessibility and Take-up of Programmes

Even if there was an accurate method of selecting families for programmes the rhetoric glosses over some potentially fatal difficulties in practice. It cannot be taken for granted that parents will take up the programmes offered. There are several factors which might prevent this happening. First, parents may not accept that they have the educational needs which professionals ascribe to them (whether for basic literacy or other adult education). Second, even if they agree they have needs, they may not wish to do anything about them. Third, they may not wish to get involved in promoting their children's literacy. Fourth, even if none of these factors apply and parents are willing to join family literacy programmes, practical problems of programme organisation may reduce take-up. Is there research which can help assess the seriousness of these factors?

Regarding the readiness of parents to accept professionals' definitions of their educational needs, it is hard to identify directly relevant research but professional educators experienced in working with adults outside institutional settings will surely recognise that many poorly educated adults simply do not feel the needs which well-educated professionals expect them to feel. They may judge that their literacy competence is not a significant problem compared to others they face. In the US context, for example, Gadsden (1994) has suggested how this can be so.

> 'In low-income communities where many family literacy programs are targeted for African-American and other families of color, the programs address only a small, and, for some participants, relatively unimportant part of the problems facing them, problems that they see as centered in the ability to obtain employment. The appearance, if not reality, of a declining economy and labor force have been evidenced in low-income communities through increases in lay-offs, the reminders of 'last hired–first fired' for many people of color, a growing crisis of labor force participation among African-American males, and crime and hopelessness that occur in tandem or shortly after economic hardship and crisis. (pp. 18–19)

Suppose, in such circumstances, that parents nevertheless accept that they have literacy needs, how many are prepared to do anything about them? Research suggests that it might be only a small minority. A British study by Bynner & Fogelman (1993), using the National Child Development Study sample when adults were aged 33, found that less than one-fifth of those who reported literacy problems had ever attended an adult literacy class.

One can be more optimistic about parents' willingness to be involved in their children's literacy. Many parental involvement programmes have secured near 100% take-up and continuing high levels of participation even in neighbourhoods considered disadvantaged (Hannon, 1995). Much depends upon how parents are invited to take part, what they are asked to do, and the programme's responsiveness to different families' circumstances. The research evidence suggests that this factor does not present insuperable difficulties.

Regarding the fourth factor, whether programmes can be organised so as to be accessible in practical terms to all parents wanting to participate, there must be doubts. It is known, for example, that centre-based parent involvement programmes typically achieve lower take-up and participation rates than home-based ones. Parents' circumstances vary so much (in terms of domestic commitments, ages of children, housing, travel, and work hours if employed) that programmes which rely on only one format (e.g. a weekly daytime class) are bound to be inaccessible for some families. If the parent and child components take place simultaneously, in parallel groups, the flexibility of programmes is further reduced.

Doubts relating to these factors could be allayed if there was evidence that take-up of restricted programmes was in fact satisfactorily high. That would mean that in practice none of the factors had a seriously adverse effect. Since take-up is crucial to programme success (where it is low the programme fails even in reaching, never mind benefiting, its target group), one might expect it to have been researched across a range of programmes. This has not happened. Sometimes the issue is treated in terms of whether or not places are filled on a programme or whether families in programmes are from the target population (e.g. St Pierre *et al.*, 1995; Brooks *et al.*, 1996) but this provides no information about what proportion of the target group takes up the programme. Research into take-up can be difficult in that it requires a target group to be defined and its size measured or estimated, as well as some agreement about what counts as an invitation to participate, but in principle it is a perfectly researchable issue.

Meanwhile, it is interesting that the most common barriers identified by Even Start programmes in the USA, according to St Pierre *et al.* were 'difficulties in the recruitment, retention, attendance and motivation of families' (p. 86). In Britain, a later phase of the ALBSU initiative funded over 400 small-scale restricted programmes but an evaluation by Poulson *et al.* (1997) implied, even if it did not explicitly so state, that recruitment difficulties may have led some programmes to be less than frank initially with parents about their aim to help them with basic skills or to recruit parents without such needs. The rhetoric will carry more conviction when it can cite evidence that a high proportion of families judged to need restricted programmes in family literacy do take them up.

(4) Educational Effects

The rhetoric of restricted programmes is quite emphatic about their effectiveness. For example, in the USA, Darling (1992) claimed that 'A recent study of Kenan Model programs has shown lasting educational benefits for both parents and children' (p. 23). Padak & Rasinski (1997) have stated, 'Family literacy programs do work, and their benefits are widespread and significant' (p. 2). In Britain, ALBSU claimed that family literacy 'shows greater gains, for adults and children, than in separate programmes, and better retention rates' (ALBSU, 1993b, p. 3).

Before turning to available research to see whether it can support such claims, it is worth pausing to ask what would count as 'success' for restricted programmes, and how rigorously it should be demonstrated. 'Success' requires, first, that children and parents derive clearly identifiable benefits from participating in programmes. However, that is not enough, for the rhetoric makes a further claim that because restricted programmes focus simultaneously on both parents and children they are more effective than

programmes that focus on either parents or children separately. Thus, Darling (1992) claimed:

> Family literacy programs place equal emphasis on two generations and two goals, maximising the effects of early education for children and literacy instruction for adults. The synergy of reciprocal learning and teaching among family members creates a home environment that both supports and enhances learning. (p. 23)

Brooks & Hayes (1998) have described what is expected thus:

> high-quality, comprehensive family literacy programs should be *designed* to encourage maximum positive interaction among the parts to produce a result that is much more than the sum of the results of the separate parts. That interaction is intended to result in an added value of comprehensive family literacy programs over single-service programs, even if a family is provided all the services of family literacy program but as separate services. (Brooks & Hayes, 1998, p. 3)

In Britain, Wells (1995) explained, 'Family literacy programmes offer what the Americans describe as "double duty dollars" because they target both parents and their children' (pp. 1–2).

The suggestion here is that something extra can be expected from restricted programmes, that parents will gain more than they would from conventional adult education programmes and also that children will gain more than they would from early childhood education parental involvement programmes. If this were not so, the basic case for restricted programmes would collapse. Research, therefore, has to compare not just 'restricted programmes versus no programme' but, more importantly, 'restricted programmes versus other programmes'. Hence, it is not enough to say of restricted programmes simply that 'they work'. Rhetoric using the word 'work' implies that criteria for success are as unproblematic as those for telling whether a washing machine works. It may 'work' in the sense of meeting a narrow functional criterion but may fail in relation to other criteria or in comparison to other methods. A key question is whether restricted programmes work better than the obvious policy alternatives, which in this case is not 'no programme at all' but separate adult education and early childhood literacy parent involvement programmes or flexible family literacy programmes. A further issue is whether, as Wells (1995) has implied, restricted programmes are more cost-effective than other provision.

The most convincing way to demonstrate that any educational programme is more effective than another is through a true experimental design in which there is random allocation—in this case of families—to each programme (and to a control no-programme condition) followed by a comparison of educational outcomes across groups. It is not easy to conduct such a study in field conditions but given the resource implications of national family literacy policies one would expect it to be done. If a true experimental design cannot be followed, then a good quasi-experimental design is the next best thing. It is important to evaluate outcomes for all those invited to participate in programmes, not just those who take up an invitation and continue to participate. Evaluation should be open to the possibility (hinted at by family literacy advocates) that restricted programmes might be more effective because they have higher retention.

The quality and extent of research into restricted programme effects falls well short of what is required. Take, for example, the claim by Darling (1992) quoted earlier that there are 'lasting educational benefits for both parents and children'. No reference is

given to the 'recent study' mentioned but it is presumably one reported by Seaman *et al.* (1991) and Seaman (1992) of 14 programmes which had concluded that the Kenan model was 'a successful intervention strategy for breaking the cycle of illiteracy which plagues millions of families in the United States' (Seaman, 1992, p. 80). Yet this 'finding' was reached without representative sampling of participants in programmes, without considering families who dropped out, without any comparison of programme participants to a control group (or even to a quasi-experimental comparison group) and without independent measures of educational outcomes. Making totally unsupported claims for the success of an educational programme without citing evidence is bad enough but to imply that there is research evidence when that evidence is seriously inadequate is perhaps worse.

Several commentators have noted the lack of research. Nickse (1993) observed that 'there is but modest evidence to date that family and intergenerational literacy programs work' (p. 34). Gadsden (1994) has commented, 'Studies that explore the parameters of literacy programs are limited, and the potential impact of the activities in them on the families that they are intended to serve is relatively unknown' (p. 2). Topping & Wolfendale (1995) commented, 'It seems that although the evaluation research on parental involvement in reading is generally positive, the picture for family literacy is still incomplete. Evaluative evidence to date is very varied in quality and quantity' (p. 31). However, since these rather bleak comments were made, findings from two well-designed evaluations of restricted programmes—one in the USA (St Pierre *et al.*, 1995) and one in England (Brooks *et al.*, 1996)—have become available.

St Pierre *et al.* (1995) reported the final evaluation of the Even Start family literacy programme. This included an experimental study in which 200 families were allocated at random to programme or control conditions. Programme effects in the experimental group were rather disappointing. There were no significant gains for parents' literacy in terms of an adult reading achievement test. Children in the programme, despite doing well in the early stages, were eventually no better than the control group on measures of emergent literacy, vocabulary and school readiness. The researchers suggest that this may be 'because control children enrolled in preschool or kindergarten, and because some Even Start children no longer participated in an Even Start early childhood program' (p. 246). Another way to interpret the findings is to see the experiment as actually a comparison between restricted programmes (prone to drop-out) and more conventional early childhood education programmes (which might well have included some parental involvement), which shows that both produce gains for children but neither is any more effective than the other. The experimental study was only one part of a larger evaluation which used data from 270 projects nation-wide in 1992–93 involving over 16,000 families. This was inevitably less rigorous than the experimental study but it did find evidence of benefits for parents and children, although none to support the claim that restricted programmes are superior to others.

Brooks *et al.* (1996) reported an evaluation of four demonstration programmes, involving over 300 families, established as part of the ALBSU initiative. The study found benefits, including gains on literacy measures, for both parents and children and a follow-up study was able to demonstrate that these were maintained 20–34 months later (Brooks *et al.*, 1997). Children's gains were shown by comparing their progress in reading test scores to that of a national sample of children tested in an earlier survey but, unlike the Even Start study, there was no direct comparison of the restricted programme with any other kinds of programme. Neither was programme take-up directly investigated. This study is in many ways a model evaluation—evidence-based, well designed,

efficient in use of resources, technically highly competent and clearly reported—but its weakness is that it leaves unanswered the central question about the effectiveness of restricted programmes, namely whether or not they are any better for children or parents than stand-alone programmes or flexible family literacy programmes. It did not answer this question because it did not address it. It did not address it because ALBSU, which commissioned the research, did not ask for it to be addressed.

In summary, there is now evidence from evaluations in Britain and the USA to support claims that restricted programmes have positive educational effects for parents and children but there is none to show that they have greater effects, or are more cost-effective, than separate child-focused or adult-focused programmes. To that extent rhetoric about restricted programmes lacks research support.

(5) Socio-economic Effects

Finally, one strand of family literacy rhetoric which cannot go unremarked is the extravagance of claims made for the socio-economic benefits of restricted programmes. Examples are confined to the USA and—perhaps exclusively—to the National Center for Family Literacy.

> At its most basic level, the power of family literacy is the power of change. It is enabling at-risk families with little hope to reverse the cycle of undereducation and poverty in their own lives. The empowerment they attain through the education and knowledge they acquire in a family literacy program allows them to take control of their lives, and consequently, to change the destiny of their families for generations to come. (National Center for Family Literacy, 1994, p. 1)

> Family literacy can help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and dependency. Family literacy improves the educational opportunities for children and parents by providing both learning experiences and group support. In the process, family literacy provides parents with skills that will improve their incomes. It provides disadvantaged children with educational opportunities that can enable them to lift themselves out of poverty and dependency. (Brizius & Foster, 1993, p. 11)

> A child's first classroom, the home, can be changed from a hopeless environment to one in which an attitude of appreciation and respect for education are modeled for the children. These changes pave the way for school successes, and thereafter life successes. The message to policy makers and legislators, then, is that family literacy can reduce the number of people on government assistance and increase the number of productive citizens. (National Center for Family Literacy, 1994, p. 1)

In Britain, the claims have been more modest. Writing of the ALBSU initiative, Hempstedt (1995) has stated, 'We have tried to avoid some of the more inflated claims, found in some American programmes, which suggest that family literacy has the capacity to effect wider social and economic change' (p. 10).

There are several reasons to treat the US claims with caution. The long-term effects of well-designed pre-school programmes reported by Lazar *et al.* (1982) show that, although they can bring welcome socio-economic benefits for children later in life, these are not nearly as dramatic as those promised in the earlier cited quotations. Research in Britain using the National Child Development Study sample suggests that thus far

education has had limited success in changing the socio-economic circumstances of families (Feinstein, 1998). Bernstein's (1970) dictum, 'Education cannot compensate for society' would be one way to summarise the position. Graff (1991) has shown that claims that literacy produces economic benefits (rather than vice versa) cannot easily be substantiated. It is likely that Freire (1972) was nearer the mark when he pointed out:

> Merely teaching men [*sic*] to read and write does not work miracles; if there
> are not enough jobs for men able to work, teaching more men to read and write
> will not create them. (Freire, 1972, p. 25)

Against this background it would be surprising if restricted programmes in family literacy were more effective than others in overcoming the effects of poverty, bearing in mind that there are unanswered questions about the take-up of such programmes and that they have not been shown to be any more effective in educational terms than other programmes. One must wonder, then, about the rhetoric which is being employed. It may be motivated by the need to secure funding from employers, business and government for specific programmes. However, as Auerbach (1995) points out, the consequences of such rhetoric could be unfortunate:

> Suggesting that enhanced family literacy interactions will break the cycle of
> poverty or compensate for problems facing the educational system only
> reinforces the ideology that blames poor people for their own problems and
> leaves social inequities intact. (p. 23)

Apart from the Rhetoric, What?

One has to conclude that rhetoric about restricted programmes in family literacy is poorly linked to available research evidence. The rhetoric obscures research findings about family literacy as something which occurs in most families, quite independently of any programmes, and which is worth understanding better. It misleadingly suggests stronger links between parental and child literacy than actually exist. It fails to appreciate the paucity of research on take-up and participation levels and ignores that which suggests there could be serious problems. Its claims for educational effects are not supported by available evidence and its claims for socio-economic effects are implausible.

It might be objected that this verdict fails to give due recognition to the positive findings of St Pierre *et al.* (1995) and Brooks *et al.* (1996)—two well-designed studies which found benefits for children and parents in restricted programmes. However, these studies do not indicate the proportion of families willing to participate in such programmes and therefore what proportion of children and parents stand to gain—other evidence discussed suggests that it could be a rather small minority. Neither, of course, do these studies indicate that there is only one kind of family literacy programme.

This critique is not meant to deny the many positive achievements of family literacy programmes in general. The rhetoric which causes so many difficulties mainly concerns restricted programmes. Most of the problems with restricted programmes would disappear if the *insistence* on combining adult basic education with other components was dropped. This would of course make them like other forms of flexible family literacy programmes. One can imagine a range of literacy programmes for adults, including parents, in which parent involvement in children's literacy could be an *option* but not a prerequisite for entry to the programme. Ideally, it ought to be possible for all adults, including parents, to access basic education in different ways according to their interests and circumstances (Bird & Pahl, 1994). Similarly, one can imagine a range of

programmes mainly concerned with children's literacy education and parental involvement in which adult basic education for parents would be an *option* for those who want it. There is very reason to incorporate adult basic education in family literacy programmes *as a response to the adults' interests*, just as it is desirable to have it as an adjunct to many forms of community education or workplace training. Parental involvement (a form of adult education in itself) is not the same as basic literacy or numerary education and should not have to be combined with it unless it clearly meets parents' interests to do so. Within the range of family literacy programmes there could be some in which, where it suited families, all components were combined in the manner of restricted programmes but this would only be one choice among many.

Relieved of the necessity to include all components in a programme there would be less need for the questionable ideology of a cycle of low literacy. Problems of recruitment and take-up could be eased and programme advocates might be under less pressure to make extravagant claims about effectiveness. There would still be problems and dilemmas common to all such programmes (e.g. relating to conceptions of literacy, avoidance of deficit characterisations of families, programme delivery, and effectiveness) but most of these have to be faced in any form of education.

There are alternatives to restricted programmes. Several models have been documented by McIvor (1990), Morrow (1995), Morrow, Tracey and Maxwell (1995), Wolfendale & Topping (1996), and Hannon (1998b). They need to be systematised and evaluated more stringently by programme developers and researchers. The family literacy policy options are certainly wider than 'restricted programmes or nothing'. The policy difficulty posed by reliance on restricted programmes is that parents' readiness to undertake a certain form of adult basic education, at a certain time and place, becomes the price of children's admission to a programme. If the parent's interest in adult basic education coincides with their interest in getting involved in their children's education then there is evidence that restricted programmes can be valuable but there is as yet no research evidence to justify such programmes being the paradigm into which all families must be squeezed.

Practice and policy needs to be informed by research into the broad category of family literacy programmes. Where possible, practitioners in the field should be supported in doing research themselves so that they can act on what they find and be better prepared to make use of other researchers' findings (Hannon, 1998a). Alternatives to restricted programmes need to be identified, documented and evaluated in terms of feasibility and outcomes and, if possible, compared to restricted programmes. The theoretical base for programme design, and particularly the vexed question of linking home and school literacies without denying the existence of either, could be helped by more research, in more communities, into existing patterns of family literacy. The issues of recruitment, take-up, participation and drop-out need to be investigated directly rather than regarded as inconvenient complications in evaluation studies. More needs to be known about programme effects, what can be expected from specific approaches used singly and in combination. The meaning of programmes to participants needs to be explicated in order to understand the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of programmes.

It is frustrating for educational researchers to see developments in their field driven by rhetoric rather than research but family literacy is not the first case of this happening and it will not be the last. Researchers are not—and, it is to be hoped, never will be—solely responsible for developments in policy and practice. However, they are responsible for the quality of their work and for showing its relation to policy and practice. It is in that spirit that this critique is offered.

Acknowledgements

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