
**Abstract**

Following the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey in 1996, there has been an upsurge of interest in adult literacy in New Zealand, as reflected in a national adult literacy strategy and ‘foundation learning’ as one of the government’s six priorities for the post-school sector. One result of these policy changes has been a move to diversify adult literacy provision. This article reviews the development of a family literacy initiative in an area of high need and discusses a number of issues that have arisen in the program’s development based on a series of formative and process evaluations.

**Introduction**

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

In 1996, New Zealand’s participation in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)\(^1\) (OECD, 1997) showed a degree of need broadly comparable to the US, Australia and Canada. With the paucity of research on adult literacy in New Zealand (Benseman, 2003a), IALS has proved to be a seminal piece of research as it sparked considerable public debate,

\(^1\) Referred to as NALS in the US.
culminating in the first ever national adult literacy policy document, *More than words* (2001) and ‘foundation skills’ being identified as one of the six priorities of the *Tertiary Education Strategy* (Ministry of Education, 2002). Since the release of this key government strategy, there has been a strong move to diversify both the number and types of delivery strategies in order to increase learning opportunities for adults with literacy needs in New Zealand.

Although there is now a large body of evaluative research internationally about family literacy, it is dominated by the measurement of learning outcomes, largely in keeping with the demands of program funders. There is however, a surprising lack of program evaluations looking at the formation of the programs and the issues that arise during their development and day-to-day functioning.

This paper therefore describes the development of a new form of provision and the issues that have arisen in a family literacy program in an area of Auckland, New Zealand’s largest city. Although this article’s findings are derived from a program situated in a small Pacific nation, they have relevance to readers in other contexts for a number of reasons. Firstly, the MFLP was originally developed from the American Kenan model of family literacy (including the four elements of adult education, parent education, early childhood education and parents and children together) and was initially guided by a prominent American family literacy advisor. Secondly, as IALS has shown, the level of literacy need for New Zealand adults is
similar to that of the US. Thirdly, the author’s personal experience in a number of countries such as Ireland, England and the US and presentations at international conferences has shown considerable congruence with both the program format and the issues arising.

**Methodology**

The paper draws on the findings of two formative and process evaluation research reports carried out by the author (Benseman, 2002, 2003b, 2004) and available at [www.comet.org.nz/](http://www.comet.org.nz/). The data for all of the evaluations was gathered from a range of sources. These included project records, school records, meeting minutes, observation of learners and interviews with fifteen elementary and early childhood teachers, as well as personnel associated with the project such as social workers and funders. But the main source of data was the extensive interviews with the 37 project adult participants (both before and after the program), the two adult education teachers and two program administrators. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. A summative evaluation (Benseman & Sutton, 2005) has also detailed the impact on both the adult participants and their nominated children.

**Origins of the Manukau Family Literacy Project (MFLP)**

Although there has been occasional interest shown in family literacy programs in New Zealand over the past decade, the most substantive program to date has been pioneered by the City of Manukau Education Trust (COMET). COMET is a not-for-profit organisation set up by the Manukau City Council (one of four political authorities making up the greater
Auckland region) to support and stimulate educational opportunities in a city that is widely recognised as having a population with the highest educational and social needs in the country.

At the beginning of 2002, COMET identified family literacy as a potential area of development for the organisation to complement its other educational work in the city. In September of that year, COMET hosted Connie Lash Freeman from the US National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) and ran a seminar with Bonnie as a key resource person to explore this option.

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

Each MFLP site involves three partner institutions – an early childhood centre, an elementary school (both of which supply child participants\(^2\) for the program) and a tertiary provider – a university at one site and a polytechnic at the other, which deliver the adult education component of the program. The early childhood centers and the elementary schools work with the child

\(^2\) Unlike most US programs, the MFLP has restricted the number of child participants to one per adult; see discussion later in this article.
participants enrolled in the program and link with the adult components for key parts of the program such as Parents and Child Together (PACT). The tertiary providers employ the adult educator, who is responsible for teaching the adult participants, as well as having some involvement in other components of the program. Both MFLP programs are located in classrooms on elementary school premises.

[FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE]

The MFLP was planned on the basis of a conventional model of family literacy, with its four components of adult education, child education, parent education and parent and child together time (Wasik & Herrmann, 2004 p. 15). After several years of operations, some distinctive features started to emerge, but in essence the MFLP still follows this model.

In brief, the adult participants attend approximately 30 hours of teaching per week, during which they undertake a range of courses in adult education (such as computing, maths, reading) and parenting education (including child development). Their nominated children attend either a partner school or early childhood center; the adult participants and their nominated children have Parent and Child Together (PACT) for approximately 20 minutes per day, four times a week.

The adults’ programs have used several programs as the basis for their curriculum. One has used a pre-entry program for a certificate in early childhood education and the other used a tailor-made course based on a
development education program. Common to both programs were strong basic skills components, child development studies and parenting. While the child participants follow their conventional programs in their early childhood centers or elementary school, they do meet with their parents during PACT for topics and activities planned jointly between the family literacy teacher and the school/early childhood centers.

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

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**Review of family literacy research**

In Phase One of the project, a review of a large body of research literature evaluating family literacy programs was undertaken (Benseman, 2002).³ This review showed the following elements to be key features of successful family literacy programs. In brief, these elements include:

- the intensity of teaching literacy skills
- staffing - staff should be composed of persons with expertise in adult education, early childhood education, elementary education,

³ For a useful summary of US family literacy literature, see (Padak, Sapin, & Baycich, 2002).
community education, social work and educational administration. It is important that no one sector (adult or child) of the program becomes dominant over the others.

- curriculum - programs should be built on participants’ (especially the adults’) strengths, using their knowledge, experiences and interests to shape the curriculum, integrating curriculum throughout the program and ensuring positive learning environments.

- teaching practices - the programs need to recognise the adult component of the learners’ needs, from the provision of appropriate adult facilities, through to teaching based on sound adult learning principles.

- collaboration - family literacy requires co-ordinated collaboration with a wide range of agencies, including schools, tertiary providers, other educational groups, special education agencies, libraries, employment agencies, welfare groups and health agencies.

These findings were reviewed in the project’s initial planning processes and incorporated by project staff into the program wherever possible. The research findings have proved to be an invaluable source of insight initially, although the results from the project’s own formative and process evaluations have since supplanted the initial review findings.
**Issues arising to date**

The evaluations of the MFLP have documented a number of issues that have arisen to date. While some issues are common to any pilot program, others are unique to family literacy. The first three issues relate to collaboration, a factor that researchers (Padak et al., 2002, pp. 18-20) have shown to be an important factor in US family literacy programs.

**Collaboration: working across conventional educational boundaries**

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

Secondly, unlike many countries such as the US and Britain, New Zealand funding sources do not always ‘fit’ readily into family literacy. Because of the
mixture of ages, no one agency or funding source can cover all of the program needs, which necessitates some degree of ‘shopping round’ and ‘mixing and matching’ of different funding sources.

Collaboration: ‘ownership’ of the program

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

This issue is most obvious in relation to the tertiary providers who enrol participants in their institutions’ courses, recruiting and paying the adult educator and are legally responsible for the program administration and yet all of this occurs under the umbrella of the MFLP project. This relationship has been clarified in part by COMET negotiating Memoranda of Understanding to define roles and responsibilities with participating providers, but there is still an on-going need to further refine these relationships within the project. This issue has been explored further in another paper by project staff (Vester, Benseman, & Houlker, 2003).

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

_Collaboration: program aims_

Because family literacy involves a wide range of stakeholders, it is inevitable that each group comes into the program with a matching array of agendas and aims. While it is a strength of family literacy that programs can achieve a range of different impacts, it is also true that this diversity of interests and expectations can result in tensions within the project. Probably the most important strategy in this respect is to constantly clarify and specify what each stakeholder’s aims are for the program so that the overall agenda is on the table for all to see and debate. The identification of the program aims will vary from site to site according to the needs and interests of the various organisations involved, but needs to be made explicit early on and be revised throughout the planning process.

_Recruitment: staff_

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

Recruitment: participants

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

Trying to recruit participants in the period preceding Christmas\(^4\) and then over the following holiday period was certainly not ideal, but was necessitated by other procedural constraints. Recruitment for the second intake of participants mid-year was easier than the first intake and international experience also points to recruitment becoming easier once programs gather momentum.

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\(^4\) Programs in New Zealand usually run over the calendar year.
Secondly, there has been the issue of whether the MFLP project had been able to recruit the most appropriate adult participants to the program. The first intakes for both sites included some people (approximately a quarter of the total group) who had quite reasonable levels of literacy skills and who probably did not meet the original intentions of the program. Subsequent experience has shown however that this situation was probably to be expected, where the first intake is often an atypical group compared with subsequent intakes. Conversely, it needs to be noted that several adults with high literacy needs were not accepted onto one program because it was judged that they would not be able to cope with the literacy demands of the courses. These applicants were referred to alternative programs, but the fact that the present structures meant that they could not be included does raise some challenges about the present program. By way of contrast, a number of adults at both sites had significant difficulties with their English and in most cases these people completed the courses successfully.

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

Throughout this pilot project, one of the distinguishing features has been the extent and intrusive nature of the crises in some of the participants’ daily lives – a finding also reported in the US (Seaman, 1992). The crises have included physical assault, custody issues, accommodation problems, major health trauma, police-related incidents, benefit difficulties, family disputes, and underpinning or alongside many of these problems, money issues. Talking about her home situation, one participant whose husband had recently been arrested for the manufacture of methamphetamine, said, “We live in an unsafe environment. We’re being harassed by Police and the neighbors, we’ve been robbed five times, the front fence crashed into three times, so I’ve put my kids with my mother.”

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

While these crises are an indicator that MFLP is indeed recruiting appropriate people for the program, they still require considerable energy and time from project staff that could otherwise be focussed on educational activities. While it may be ideal to have a social worker available to help deal with these crises, it is interesting to note one adult educator’s comment that she considered that her involvement in working these crises through with her students (often in association with social service agencies) helped give her program its distinctive flavour, was integral to her credibility with the students and an important reason behind the overall impact of the program.

Appropriateness of adult education courses

The second evaluation report (Benseman, 2003b) raised the question of the appropriateness of the two set curriculum courses chosen for the adult education component of MFLP, as opposed to an open curriculum, needs-driven course as is the norm in many adult literacy programs. The two courses used for the MFLP (a foundation course for Bairds Otara and an early childhood course at Rowandale) were chosen as the ‘best fit’ between the MFLP goals and the programs available at Manukau Institute of Technology and Auckland University of Technology that were eligible for government funding. In both cases, these courses have meshed reasonably well with the ideals of family literacy, with the added advantage that passing
these courses also provides the learners with formalised qualifications that have broad recognition outside the MFLP.

Feedback from the learners specifically identified the *Future Focus* component (a career planning module) of the Bairds Otara program as particularly valuable in helping develop medium to long-term aims – something that most reported they had never had previously. With the Rowandale program, the early childhood development focus of the certificate appears to have been an invaluable basis for many discussions and debates about parenting issues; feedback from these students indicated that most had strongly valued these debates and they felt they now had a broader repertoire of parenting options available as a result. A significant number of the parents in this program also reported they had adopted non-physical disciplining in response to these debates.

While it is true that both courses have content that is more related to external requirements than the personal learning needs of the participants, both programs have been able to operate with a reasonable degree of flexibility. This flexibility has enabled the adult educators to maximise the relevance of the courses for the learners by going beyond the minimum requirements of the set curricula.

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

**Conclusion**

All forms of educational provision encounter a range of issues in their implementation, especially during their developmental initial stages. Developing family literacy programs therefore is not alone in having many issues to resolve, although some of its issues are unique to its particular characteristics and location within the educational system.

For family literacy does not sit readily within conventional educational structures, and this is true both internationally (Padak et al., 2002) and in New Zealand. This difficulty occurs largely because traditional educational
systems are very age-stratified and family literacy transcends these traditional categories. This lack of ‘fit’ can be seen for example in problems of accessing funding, finding appropriate staff and co-ordination between the different educational players involved.

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

Family literacy has been a distinctive innovation for New Zealand education, as it transcends the traditional age-bound nature of literacy provision by integrating tuition for both parents and children and is seen increasingly as a means of creating ‘learning communities’ around schools, which is a current policy priority for the New Zealand education system.

In this way, family literacy can be seen as an exemplar of lifelong learning by breaking the mould of ‘front-loaded’ educational programs. Whether or not it can also break the mould of inter-generational literacy difficulties in a significant way remains to be seen.
References


Figure 1 – Manukau Family Literacy Program Management structure

FUNDING PARTNERS

Funding Agencies

Lead Agency (COMET)

PROGRAM SITES 1 & 2 (families)

FACILITATION PARTNERS

Manukau Community

DELIVERY PARTNERS

Partner 1
Early childhood

Partner 2
Elementary school

Partner 3
Tertiary

Regional Co-ordinator

MFLP Reference Group

Project Evaluator

Professional Support
Table 2 – Summary data about MFLP participants

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Bairds Otara Intake 1</th>
<th>Bairds Otara Intake 2</th>
<th>Rowandale</th>
<th>MFLP total</th>
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<td>Adults/children enrolled</td>
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<td>12/12</td>
<td>14/14</td>
<td>37/37</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% attendance*</td>
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<td>82%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
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<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
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* Does not include attendance data from those who withdrew

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