

New Zealand : the Manukau Family Literacy Project

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Context

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 the development of a national adult literacy strategy and 'foundation learning' as one of the government's priorities for the post-school sector in order to:

- significantly increase the literacy, numeracy and language skills of the workforce at the low-skilled end
- improve settlement outcomes for new migrants and refugees
- raise the foundation skills of parents with poor educational attainment who want to support their children's learning.

One result of these policy changes has been a move to diversify adult literacy provision such as programmes in the workplace and involving families. Like most countries, New Zealand operates a very age-stratified educational system where there is very limited mixing across the generations. Over recent years, a number of organisations have been developing family literacy programmes that involve both parents and their children as learners in their own right and together. Given that a high proportion of children struggling with literacy and numeracy come from families where the parents are in this category also, family literacy is an effective way to not only address literacy issues for the individuals (adults and children) concerned, but also as a way of addressing the inter-generational perpetuation of the issues.

There have been a number of family-based initiatives (often referred to as *whanau* [Maori for family] *literacy*), but the best documented example of these programmes is the one developed by the City of Manukau Education Trust (COMET)¹ where there has been a full recording of the programme's genesis and subsequent development as well as a summative evaluation of its impact (Benseman 2002; Benseman 2004; Benseman 2004; Benseman and Sutton 2005; Benseman 2006).

The location for this programme is the southern part of Auckland, Manukau City, which has New Zealand's most culturally diverse and largest representation of low socio-economic groups of any area in the country. IALS data showed a disproportionately high number of adults in this area with low literacy skills, which is consistent with similar patterns among Manukau children. Literacy needs are highest among Maori and Pasifika groups that have been the main target group of the COMET programme.

The COMET programme was originally modeled on the American Kenan model, but has since developed a distinctive New Zealand flavour to its operations (particularly the Parent and Child Together Time). The model involves adults attending a tertiary programme in their children's schools, combined with studies in child development and being a participant in the reading and numeracy components of their children's schoolwork. It has been located in low socio-economic areas and has proved to have a particular appeal to Pasifika people.

¹ See <http://www.comet.org.nz>

The Programme

COMET is a not-for-profit organisation set up by the Manukau City Council to support and stimulate educational opportunities in the city. 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 Centre 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 (Benseman 2002; Benseman 2003; Benseman 2004).

Each MFLP site involves three partner institutions – an early childhood centre, an elementary school (both of which supply child participants 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 centres and the elementary schools work with the child 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.

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. 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 centre; 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 centres 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 centres.

Issues

As with any new programme, the MFLP has had to resolve a number of issues that have arisen in its development. In brief, these include:

- achieving effective collaboration when working across educational institution boundaries

- resolving different agendas and aims of the participating groups
- recruiting staff appropriate to the multiple demands of family literacy
- recruiting high-need participants, especially in the early stages of the programme
- coping with participants' personal crises
- finding ways of including non-PACT children in the programme.

Impact and lessons learnt

A summative evaluation of the MFLP (Benseman and Sutton 2005) has shown considerable impact on the course participants, their families and the participating institutions. This evaluation identified a number of key outcomes resulting from the programme.

Firstly, the programme has been successful in recruiting (and retaining a high proportion – at over 90% attendance rates) of adult learners who have historically been under-represented not only in the participation statistics of New Zealand tertiary education, but also the statistics of success in the schooling system (Cain Johnson and Benseman 2005). These participants have typically left school early with few or no qualifications and worked in low status, low-skill occupations with limited aspirations for their own and their children's futures.

Secondly, the MFLP has achieved a high rate of success in raising their academic skills. The adults improved their self-confidence and self-efficacy, and also raised their long-term aspirations and ambitions. There is evidence that many who have been out of the programme for some time are also going on to achieve these ambitions – they are indeed doing what they said they intended to do. As parents, MFLP learners have become more involved in their schools and more active in their children's education, both at school and at home. They are modelling new possibilities and provide valuable input for their children. There is some evidence that their children are performing better academically at school and are more confident and active socially than previously.

At one site, only one of the 14 participants had been in paid work and none in tertiary education prior to enrolling on the MFLP. A year on from the programme:

- at least eight were in some form of employment
- two were studying
- six are planning on doing a tertiary course in the next few years.

At the other site, three of the 10 were in paid employment and none was in tertiary education prior to enrolling in the MFLP. A year after the programme:

- at least seven were in paid employment
- six were in a tertiary programme
- two are planning on doing a tertiary course in the next year.

While many have succeeded as a result of participating in this family literacy programme, it does not always achieve the same level of outcomes for all those who enrol. There have been withdrawals and some have not changed much either academically or in broader terms as people as parents, but most have. There is universal support for the programme and criticisms are limited to operational details.

Thirdly, the MFLP is having effects beyond the individual learners themselves. The MFLP is contributing to a more integrated community of educational providers where it operates and it is valued by the project's early childhood, primary and tertiary professionals for this outcome. The programme models a positive example of lifelong learning in action for the adults and children in the programme, for those professionals involved in the programme and increasingly, for children and parents not directly involved in the programme.

Conclusion

As a result of the evaluations carried out on the MFLP, a number of key features have been identified as contributing to the success of the programme, including:

- a lead agency to plan and co-ordinate the overall project
- a skilled adult educator who understands and copes with the multi-faceted demands of family literacy
- a programme of reasonable duration and intensity built round the four components of family literacy – parent education, child education, adult education and parent and child together (PACT)
- regular professional development that involves staff at all levels of involvement
- sustained commitment from all of the partner institutions
- clear understanding between all participating institutions of their respective obligations and responsibilities
- adequate funding to ensure all components of the programme are available
- regular and on-going management/operational meetings to ensure smooth functioning of the daily routines
- an adult-appropriate teaching space in a central location
- physical proximity for early childhood and primary school partner institutions
- public celebration of key events and achievements (e.g. graduations).

Finally, to give a flavour of the MFLP, case studies of two participants are shown below.

Mele is a 29 year old single mother of four children. Born in the Pacific, she attended school until she was 18, but did not gain any qualifications. After working part-time in some manual jobs for several years, she migrated to New Zealand, where she met her partner and had her four children. Since her arrival in New Zealand she has worked from time to time on a part-time basis, but has spent most of her time raising her children. Since her partner left to go to Australia, she has been on a benefit, although her mother is nearby and offers support and childcare when needed.

Mele was approached by one of her teachers at primary school about enrolling in the MFLP. Initially she was very reluctant to enrol, but was convinced because she was

keen to be able to help her children with their homework, especially her youngest child who had just started school. The MFLP was the first educational programme Mele had done since leaving school, so she was very nervous at the beginning of the programme. Her English fluency was not great and she had difficulties with writing and spelling. She had never used a computer prior to joining the programme.

At the beginning of the programme, Mele had difficulties with the payment of her benefit, which was only resolved after many phone calls and a case worker visiting the programme. Then, during the programme, one of Mele's children developed a serious health problem that necessitated her not attending for several weeks while she managed her health care. Although her mother was able to help with many of the on-going absences of her child, Mele continued to miss occasional sessions and needed additional help in order to complete the course requirements.

At the completion of the programme, Mele felt a lot more confident about speaking English, especially with strangers. Although she was extremely nervous about making a presentation to the class, she was able to achieve this milestone and sees this as one of her greatest achievements. One of her older children had experienced bullying and she was thrilled that she was able to approach this child's teacher to raise the issue – something she felt she would never have been able to do before. Mele is now able to perform basic functions on a computer, but does not feel that her writing or spelling have changed much. Mele's nominated child in the programme, Sam, has been very excited to have his mother at school in the programme. He has looked forward to her PACTT visits, much to the envy of his classmates and has taken on a new interest in reading since Mele started PACTT. He now has several favourite books and his teachers have commented on his improved attention span in class.

Mele completed the course successfully, but has no plans to do any more tertiary study. She thinks she will "probably look for some sort of job," but is unsure about anything beyond this. She says that her most important priority is "helping her kids with their homework." She is also thinking about coaching a school sports team next year.

Miriama was born in a small country town in Northland. She is in her early 40s and has four children with her husband. As the oldest daughter, Miriama left school early to look after her sick mother. When her mother died, she felt it was too late to return to school, so drifted through a series of seasonal jobs before moving to Auckland, where she met her husband. As a mother of four children she has been active in many community and school activities, as well as occasional part-time jobs working in supermarkets and fruit-picking. With her youngest child, Ben, now at primary school, Miriama has felt that "my time has come now" to make up for what she missed as a child. She was not clear about what she wanted to do, or even how to go about finding out what her options are, although her family's very limited resources were a very real constraint to her options. A leaflet that Ben brought home from the school about MFLP seemed to be an interesting option, especially as it coincided with her desire to "do something different" and the zero enrolment fees were an added bonus.

Like most of her classmates, Miriama found the beginning of the course an uphill struggle as she came to grips with organising new routines at home to fit her studies into

the family routines (including some re-allocation of family jobs to free her time up) and doing things she hadn't done "since I was at school – and that was some time ago!" Within a short time however, Miriama quickly established herself as a hard-working, able adult student who was intent on making up for lost ground. She re-discovered her love of books and enjoyed making time to read to Ben at home – something she wishes she had done more of for her other children when they were young.

Miriama completed the MFLP programme in her stride and has enrolled in a business qualification at the local polytechnic – "I want to carry a suitcase, not a shovel." From being behind his peers, Ben has made steady progress and is now "up to scratch" according to his teacher. Asked what the best thing he does with his mother, Ben replies, "going to the library with her on Friday night."

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