Through a Rear-View Mirror: Families Look Back at a Family Literacy Program

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Abstract

In this article, we report on a study in which we interviewed working class families who were the first cohort in a family literacy program that had been locally developed and implemented in a small village in Canada more than two decades previously in response to community-identified needs. The study was framed by Tulving's concept of episodic memory which he described as autobiographical and which allows one to recall and reflect on one's past experiences because they are significant. Ten of the original 18 families were available, and they were interviewed in their homes using a semi-structured protocol. Interviews were transcribed and then coded according to themes. Findings include the following: families reported that the hands-on structure of the program in which they worked alongside their children helped them understand learning through play and developmentally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy; they gained insights as to how they could continue to support their children's learning at home and in the community; they became more comfortable in school and knowledgeable about its workings and subsequently participated more in school affairs; they and their children benefited socially from the program; and they believed the program assisted their children's transition to school. They also identified areas that needed improvement, including more frequent sessions and more explanation of some aspects of the program. The study extends previous research in family literacy in that it demonstrates that programs can contribute to families' social capital.

Key Words: family literacy programs, social capital, retrospective interviews, early childhood, learning, parents, involvement, transition to school, Canada

Introduction

It is now generally recognized that families can be rich sites for children's early literacy learning before schooling. Since the publication of Denny Taylor's (1983) foundational book, *Family Literacy*: *Young Children Learning to Read and Write,* other researchers have documented how families support young children's literacy learning in diverse social and cultural contexts (e.g., Gregory, 2005; Mui & Anderson, 2008; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Because of this body of ethnographic and naturalistic research studies documenting the potential of the family as a site for young children's literacy development, educators have developed family literacy programs intended to build on and enhance children's literacy learning at home. Much of the research on family literacy programs has examined the impact on children's literacy development in the short term (e.g., Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2011; Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Jang, & Gagne, 2010; Brooks, Pahl, Pollard, & Rees, 2008; Phillips, Hayden, & Norris, 2006), and there is very little longitudinal research as to their impact. Furthermore, studies have tended to focus on young children's emergent print literacy knowledge or language development (e.g., Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000), and there is relatively little research that has examined the broader impact of family literacy programs in terms of their effects on home–school relationships, insights that parents gain in understanding schooling and how to support their children's learning, and how family literacy programs might benefit schools. As well, although parents are seen as playing an essential role in family literacy programs, there is a general dearth of research giving voice to their insights and perspectives.

Thus the current study is significant for several reasons. Despite the central roles that parents are expected to play in family literacy programs, this group has largely been ignored by researchers, even though they could provide a more expansive perspective on the effects of family literacy programs beyond children's early language and literacy development. As Swain and Brooks (in press), who studied family literacy in the United Kingdom and internationally, compellingly point out,

> parents are key players in FL programmes, not least because the agency they exert in whether they choose to attend or not, and the number enlisting, decide whether or not the programme is viable to run. We contend that research based upon insider insight and situated knowledge has the potential to produce bottom up evidence (Appleby, 2004). As insiders and consumers of the programmes, parents make vital contributions to policy and practice through their evaluations of the programme, but also through their insights on issues such as recruitment and retention.

> We therefore believe that parents' perspectives are key to designing future successful FL programmes (Hannon et al., 2006) and studying such views adds to understandings that will be useful to policy makers, local authority managers, head teachers, adult literacy teachers, early years teachers, parents, and researchers. (pp. 3–4)

Second, the parents in this study were able to reflect on and evaluate the program 20 years after they had participated in it and had seen their children proceed through school. That is, rather than thinking about anticipated or potential benefits of a family literacy program as parents in previous studies have done, usually after having just participated in a program with their four- and five-year-olds (e.g., Anderson & Morrison, 2007), the parents in this study had the benefit of having seen how their participation in the program had contributed (or had not contributed) to their children's literacy development and their learning as they proceeded through school. Related to this point, the years between their involvement in the program and this study would have provided time for them to reflect on the program and analyze its benefits and any shortcomings. Furthermore, two decades later, none of the parents had direct connections with the school or the teachers involved, and thus we postulated that they would feel that they could speak candidly about the program.

Framework

This study is informed by sociohistorical theory (Vygotsky, 1987; Wertsch, 1985) wherein learning is seen as social, as well as individual, with more competent or more experienced significant others supporting the learning of the skills and knowledge considered important in that particular context or community (Rogoff, 2003). Also important within this theory is the recognition that there are differences in the ways individual communities acculturate younger members. For example, in reference to literacy, Clay (1993) pointed out that the values ascribed to it, its functions and purposes, and how it is learned and taught vary considerably from one sociocultural context to the next. Thus, in this study, we were interested in understanding how parents saw their roles in supporting their children's learning, the types of activities and knowledge in the program they saw as valuable, and how their understanding of curriculum and pedagogy was influenced (or not) by their participation in the program.

Also informing this study is a theory of *social capital* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). A central tenet of this theory is that "cultural disposition, aptitudes, preferences, and behaviors/practices…are sent unconsciously and internalized through family socialization processes" (Symeou, 2007, p. 474). Some educators and researchers argue that middle class families have the necessary social

capital to ensure their children's success at school. As Laureau explains, "schools utilize particular linguistic structures, authority patterns, and types of curricula; children from higher social locations enter schools already familiar with these social arrangements" (1987, p. 74). Many children from working class and nonmainstream homes come to school not possessing this social capital and therefore cannot access the *codes of power* (Delpit, 2006) that enable them to succeed at school. We were particularly interested in ascertaining whether parents saw the family literacy program as enhancing families' knowledge of schooling, their interactions with teachers, their comfort level with schools, and otherwise "leveling the playing field" for them. Put another way, we wondered if the families believed the program contributed to their developing social capital that would enable them and their children to participate more successfully in school, knowing, of course, that they would not use that terminology.

Methodologically, this study draws on the construct of *episodic memory* (Tulving, 1983, 2002). Tulving distinguishes between semantic memory—the recalling of facts—and episodic memory, which he describes as "memory [that] is about happenings in particular places at particular times, or about 'what,' 'where,' and 'when'" (2002, p. 3). He later elaborated, "It is the only memory system that allows people to consciously re-experience past experiences" (Tulving, 2002, p. 6). Essentially then, episodic memory is autobiographical and allows one to recall and reflect on one's past experiences. Anderson and his colleagues, in their work on the long-term impact of museum visits, argue that episodic memory, unlike semantic memory, does not require rehearsal of information in order for it to be remembered or retrieved (Anderson & Shimizu, 2007; Anderson, Storksdieck, & Spock, 2007); it is imprinted in memory because of the impact of the experience. Thus, we theorized that families would remember and reflect on their participation in the family literacy program if it had a significant impact on them and if it had played a significant role in their lives.

Context

This study took place in Boonestown (all names are pseudonyms), a rural community of about 1,800 people in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Part of a larger incorporated town, Boonestown still retained its distinctiveness and strong sense of identity, and St. Mary's School, where the family literacy program was located, played a large part in this. With a population of about 300 students, this public school enrolled all children in the community from kindergarten through Grade 9, after which they attended a nearby high school for the final three years of secondary education.

Although the school had strong support from the community in the late 1980s, it was also facing many challenges. First, some of the children came from economically and socially disadvantaged homes where their early language and literacy experiences were different from those that school tends to privilege and build on (e.g., Heath, 1983). Second, the students consistently scored below expectations on standardized tests and other measures of achievement. Third, a considerable number of students dropped out of school once they reached the junior high or high school level (Norman, 1997). Fourth, the community lacked preschool and other organized early childhood programs. Finally, the principal and the staff realized that an inordinate number of students were being designated as having special needs. Believing that some of these challenges could be addressed by working with preschool children and their families, the school principal, with the support of his staff, appealed to the school district to implement "an early intervention program" (A. Mercer, personal communication, June 2007) to give the children a "head start." Responding to this identified need, the school district approved the establishment of a pilot "early intervention program," and district personnel began the work.

From the Ground Up

In the 1980s when this initiative began, there were very few models of family literacy programs generally and none that we knew of in Newfoundland and Labrador, a relatively isolated province of Canada with high unemployment, generally low literacy rates, and a large number of school dropouts. However, those charged with and responsible for developing the program intuitively knew the importance of community involvement from the beginning for initiatives such as this, and so a series of meetings was held with the school's Parent Advisory Committee, the Community Health Nurse, social workers, the priest of the Anglican Church that many of the families regularly attended, and the parents and other adults who would be participating in the program.

Based on this dialogue and discussion, the program that evolved consisted of monthly, two-hour sessions for four-year-olds and their parents or another significant adult. Sessions took place in the kindergarten classroom in the school, and the children and adults were encouraged to circulate among and engage in the various learning centers containing age-appropriate activities designed to promote children's language, literacy, and cognitive/intellectual development. The facilitators—the Grade 1 teacher and the kindergarten teacher, assisted by the district early childhood consultant—took care to model interactions with the children thought to support and promote children's learning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). For example, they engaged the children in dialogic storybook reading, they explained to parents the importance of sorting and

counting in supporting young children's mathematical development, and they demonstrated through examples how children's writing develops from drawing and scribbling and how children's invented spelling indicates their emerging understanding of symbol–sound relationships and allows them to construct and represent meaning in print before they are able to spell conventionally. They also made sure to ask questions that promoted children's use of decontextualized language (e.g., Curenton & Justice, 2004; Snow, 1983); they drew children's attention to print and different texts and their functions and purposes (Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Lenters, & McTavish, 2012). They encouraged children to think beyond the here and now or the immediate context, what Siegel (1984) refers to as cognitive distancing. For example, when children labelled objects in the illustrations during shared book reading, they were encouraged to make connections between them and their own lived experiences. At each session, the facilitators provided each family with various learning resources to take and keep at home, including high quality children's books, writing and drawing materials, and so forth.

Method

A. Anderson and J. Anderson, the first and second authors, were both familiar with Boonestown, having lived there in the late 1980s when the family literacy program was developed and instituted. At that time, J. Anderson was the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction for the local school district that was responsible for St. Mary's School. He provided logistical and moral support for the project and worked with the primary consultant for the district and the teachers and principal at St. Mary's School in conceptualizing and developing the program. Because of other responsibilities, he was not involved in actually delivering the program, though he did visit sessions to lend moral support and to signal the district's interest in and commitment to the project. He left the district to assume his current position as a university professor after the first year of the program's implementation. Although he was aware of the program's continuation and success, he was not involved in it.

Cognizant of the lack of longitudinal research in family literacy programs, Anderson initiated contact with the people who had been involved in leading the program, who were very pleased that he was embarking on the research project and volunteered to lend any assistance, including helping to locate the families who had participated. To assist us with recruitment of the participants and with data collection, we employed a research assistant from the community who had recently graduated with a B.A. and was about to enter a two-year teacher education program. Interestingly, the research assistant had been one

of the children who had participated in the program with her mother as part of the initial cohort, but she reported having no recollection of the program.[1] It should be noted that the assistant's parents were not among the interviewees.

We were able to locate and contact 12 of the 18 or so families who had participated in the program nearly two decades earlier. As expected, some of the original families had moved elsewhere to find employment, and we were unable to locate them. Ten mothers agreed to participate in the study; the two remaining families were unable to participate for various reasons. We offered to interview the participants either in their homes or at a neutral location such as a coffee shop, the public library, a café, or restaurant. However, all ten participants asked to be interviewed in their homes.

Prior to commencing the interviews, J. Anderson worked with the research assistant and provided training in interviewing techniques, research ethics, and so forth. Accompanied by the research assistant, he interviewed two of the participants and afterward reviewed and discussed the interviewing process with the research assistant. She then conducted the third interview with the second author present, and over the next two weeks completed the remainder of the interviews on her own, according to the participants' availability. The interviews were recorded using a miniature digital recorder with a built-in microphone, which was usually placed unobtrusively on a table between the interviewer and the participant. The recorder was turned on just before the interview began and was turned off after it was completed. The interviewer created a digital recording file for each interview and identified the participants, the date, and location at the beginning of the interview (see Appendix). After data collection was completed, the audio files were transcribed verbatim. The research team next read through the entire data set and did an initial coding of the data. Using a constant–comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we looked for similarities and differences across the data set. We then grouped together similar codes into themes (Frost, 2011); we report these themes in the results section. A research assistant coded the data employing these themes, and an independent rater then coded about 20% of the data set. Inter-rater agreement was approximately 90%, and areas of disagreement were resolved after discussion.

Results

The analysis of the data revealed the following six major themes that describe the responses: (1) parents developing knowledge about literacy and learning, child development, and contemporary early childhood education and pedagogy; (2) the importance placed on social–emotional learning by the families; (3) the role of the family literacy program in helping children make

the transition from home to school in the kindergarten year; (4) parents' roles in supporting out-of-school learning; (5) the values that families saw in the structure of the program; and (6) concerns about the program and suggestions for improvement. Although this study was not a program evaluation, we feel it is important that this latter theme be included, because it is important to give voice to these concerns as expressed by parents.

Parents Developing Knowledge

One of the principal values that the participants attributed to the program was that it helped make the child-centered, play-based curriculum and pedagogy that their children would experience at school more transparent and understandable to them. That is, by working alongside their children at the learning centers in the classroom, by observing the modeling provided by the program facilitators, and through the ongoing discussions that were an integral part of the program, the families came to understand what early learning in a more formal setting "looked like." One parent commented, "I knew what was looked forward to and what they need and what was going to be done in kindergarten," while another said, "It helped me understand what the education of my child is gonna be looking like from the beginning." They also appreciated how their experiences helped them understand how they could support their children's learning and development. As one parent cogently put it,

> Helping the parents to understand their role, helping the parents understand how their child is going to be taught and how they will be learning and what would be available, the resources, you know, all that, the thing is, it's important for parents to be a part of that.

Another believed that the program levelled the playing field, as it were, by helping parents understand what was expected of children when they went to school and by supporting them by suggesting different ways that they could help their children "get ready for school." She elaborated,

> Ah, because before this program, a lot of children went to kindergarten, and they [had] absolutely no knowledge—anything regarding colors, numbers, and nothing. But with this way, at least every child got started, like they were a little bit prepared, right?

In addition to developing a better understanding of early childhood curriculum and pedagogy, parents also indicated that they developed a better understanding of children's development and children's learning. For example, some parents commented on individual differences among children, noting that they learn at different rates and have strengths in different areas. Others appeared cognizant of the tendency to "push" young children (Elkind, 1981)

when they are not developmentally ready to learn the targeted skills or acquire new knowledge (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). As one parent said, "I do not think they should [push] too much on the child, first, because…everything is exciting to them."

Researchers (e.g., Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991) have found that working class parents tend to favor skills-based curriculum and instruction involving structured activities, work sheets, and so on, tending to eschew learning through play. That these families from working class homes embraced the learning-through-play philosophy of the program—believing their children benefited from it—is likely attributable to the fact that the pedagogy was made *visible* (Gregory, Williams, Baker, & Street, 2004) to the families through the hands-on involvement, modeling, and discussion. Commenting on how her child enjoyed participating, one mother said, "They made it playful so that it did not seem like they were in school," while another remembered her child saying, "I would like to go to the water, I would like to go to the sandbox, and I think painting, of course." Another mother, reflecting on her own learning, said, "I never did know, child playing,why? [Now] I know it's good for them."

According to Lareau (1987) and others, working class families often do not understand the workings of schools, and some of them have unpleasant memories of their experiences there. Furthermore, historically, schools have tended not to involve families unless children were experiencing difficulties—a point brought home by one of the interviewees who said, "When we went to school, like even mother did not [indecipherable] anything, and if the mother came, that was bad. Like bad news!" Several parents commented on how, by participating in the program, they came to understand better, as one put it, "what was going on." They commented that they also got to know and understand the teachers better and, indeed, realized that the role of the teachers was more challenging and demanding than they had previously thought. In fact, several parents indicated that they had volunteered to help out at the school after the culmination of the program so that they could assist the teachers in their very demanding roles.

In summary, then, through their participation in the program, the families began to understand better the play-based, child-centered curriculum and pedagogy. They also developed insights into child development and came to recognize the importance of providing children with opportunities to engage in age-appropriate activities and experiences. Many of them commented on the value of play and the recognition that children learn through play. Finally, they indicated that they became familiar with the expectations and routines of school, got to know the teachers and other staff, and became more comfortable with being in school to the extent that they continued as parent volunteers.

Social–Emotional Learning

Because the program focused on literacy and early learning, obviously many of the responses alluded to the cognitive domain. Interestingly, several of the families also commented on how the program supported their children's social–emotional development. As explained earlier, there was a dearth of formal child care/early education opportunities in the community, and playgroups and the like were not common. Thus, families saw the program as a space where their children could interact with and get to know other children. As one parent commented, "I think that it was a really good chance to meet children their own age. Like the fact that they're too young to go outside to play." Although the community was quite small with most people knowing each other, in reality, some families felt isolated. For example, one mother commented, "Well, it gave them the opportunity to intertwine with other kids that we were living in an area that there wasn't [sic] a lot of children for her to play with." Elaborating on how her daughter learned prosocial skills such as sharing and attending as she interacted with other children, she elaborated, "…and when she went there, she got to learn how to share, listen to strangers—which was teachers—because that time they did not know her a lot." As with many contemporary families, some of the children came from single-child homes and, again, their parents recognized the broader social development that was promoted through the program, as was the case with D's mother, who said,

> D. has been the only child, right?…know kids and, like, more or less, a little second family there, when he went to there, and he had to share, and they shared toys, shared pencils. They all had little books that they had to work together, so they learn how to work as a group, as well as individual, right? So it showed them a lot of things, showed them a lot of things.

Therefore, while the program was intended to focus primarily on children's literacy and general cognitive development, it also appears to have had other positive consequences. As one of the participants put it, "So the human interaction…or whatever you want to call that, it's so important, along with book learning." Several of the parents also observed how their children made friends within the context of the program. Others commented on how it helped them develop confidence in their own abilities and also helped their children to develop confidence, especially when they transitioned to school, a theme that we address next.

Transition to School

Early childhood educators have long recognized that transitions from home to preschool and/or to school can be very challenging for children, and many educational jurisdictions have developed procedures and processes to help children and their families in this regard (Kagan & Tarrant, 2010). However, two decades ago in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, relatively little attention was paid to the important phenomenon of transitions in the early childhood years. One of the parents reflected on the experiences of her two older children's entry into kindergarten: "Apparently my son and daughter, when they start[ed] kindergarten, it was frightening them, it took a full year [to adjust], just kindergarten."

Many of the families commented on how the family literacy program helped their children make the transition into kindergarten by learning the routines and structures they would meet there. They commented on how their children "knew what to expect" and "what to do" when they entered kindergarten the next year. As one mother put it, "Yes, it did because by the time when she went to kindergarten, she knew the routine of what they had to do in the mornings." In addition, parents indicated that because their children had gotten to know the teacher and their classmates and had become familiar with the expectations and routines of the classroom, they entered kindergarten feeling comfortable and confident. Commenting on how she had accompanied her son to his first day in kindergarten the next year after participating in the family literacy program, one of them recalled, "He said, 'Ok, Mom you can go home now.' So this really prepared them; he was not…afraid." Another commented insightfully on how her accompanying her son to the sessions had allowed him to become comfortable with school in a highly supportive way, and he had no difficulties separating from his parents when he went to kindergarten the following year. Indeed, the support that the families described embodied the principles of scaffolding children's learning and development (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), a central tenet of Vygotskian theory.

Supporting Out-of-School Learning

Researchers have demonstrated that children greatly benefit from growing up in literacy-rich homes where their families encourage their engagement in a range of literacy events, school-like literacy practices, and nonschool literacy practices (e.g., Mui & Anderson, 2008; Purcell-Gates, 1996). Furthermore, as the literature on summer reading loss demonstrates (e.g., Allington, McGill-Franzen, & Camilli, 2007), children need continuing support from family or others in order to maintain what they have learned at school. Yet, one of the

criticisms of family literacy programs is that they download the responsibility for children's literacy learning from the school to the home (e.g., Whitehouse, 2001). Furthermore, school literacy and home or out-of-school literacy are sometimes positioned as oppositional or binaries. However, the dichotomy between school literacy and out-of-school literacy may be more of an issue for researchers and theorists than it is of practical importance for families.

Several perspectives with respect to this issue stood out with the families here. First, they tended to see education and learning as lifelong and occurring within and outside of schools, as reflected in the following comments:

> I think it's important because in reality, yes, a child goes to the school, and a child learns in the school environment from a teacher that is during the day. But that has to be sustained through the child's whole life, through the rest of their day, or through their evening, or so on.

> To me, it's not only about learning from books—learning to read and learning mathematics—those are the basics and very, very important. But to me, a child has to learn to interact with others; a child has to learn how to live in…the real world. And that's just as important to the education of any child as the book learning.

Families also saw the program as not only promoting the importance of parents and significant others supporting young children's early learning, but also making explicit how they could enact that support. That is, as we have argued elsewhere (Anderson, Anderson, & Morrison, 2012), although parents are inundated with the message in the popular media and from various educational, governmental, and community agencies about how they are their child's first and most important teacher, very little is done to make explicit to parents how they are to actualize that role. One participant, articulating what she saw as valuable in the program, reflected this reality:

> Helping the parents to understand their role, helping the parents understand how their child is going to be taught and how they will be learning and what would be available, the resources, you know, all that's going to be a part of that.

Another commented that, "All parents need to know the importance, their importance, or their roles, the importance of their roles in their child's learning." Others noted that while they would be indoctrinated on the importance of reading with their children *after* the children began school, through their participation in the program, they became more aware of the role of shared reading and other literacy activities in their children's literacy development prior to school and also in preparing their children for literacy instruction in school (Heath, 1982). As well, several parents valued the modeling of how

to support young children's learning on the part of the facilitators, while others commented on the high quality and engaging children's books that were provided and how they continued to share these books with their children at home. One parent commented on how she observed other parents reading with and interacting with their children, implying she also learned from that experience.

In summation, families realized that learning is an ongoing process, not restricted to formal instruction in school. They appreciated how they were made aware of how they could support their children's learning at home and in the community, and they valued the modeling and the resources provided them.

Structure of the Program

There are many different models of family literacy programs (e.g., Wasik, 2012), and while the so called four component—early childhood education, adult education, parent–child together time, parent time—or "Kenan model" (Darling & Hayes, 2004) is often presented as being the "best," we know of very little comparative, empirical research that has tested the efficacy of different program configurations, models, or structures. As was pointed out earlier, when the program was being developed at St. Mary's School, there were few available models of family literacy programs, and so the developers were guided by the research in early learning and development, early childhood education, adult learning, and, to a large extent, intuition or what made sense for the context in which they were working.

That the families valued the structure of the program was implicit in the themes discussed earlier. For example, having the opportunity to work alongside their children in the classroom provided parents with the opportunity to observe their children's learning and development. They also saw how their children engaged with the age-appropriate activities and materials at the various learning centers and appreciated how children learn through play. They valued the facilitators' modeling and commented that the facilitators made transparent and explicit how significant others can *scaffold* (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) or support children's learning and development. Moreover, they valued the materials that were provided, especially the high-quality children's books that were sent home from each session.

Parents also specifically mentioned what they saw as positive attributes of the structure and orientation of the program. For example, one mentioned how she valued the social aspect of the program and how she got to know her neighbors and the other participants better over the course of the year. Several parents also mentioned the value of the learning centers where they worked one-on-one with their child as being very valuable. One mother recalled, "they

were interested in what was going on and different centers, and they were really helped," and as indicated previously, others mentioned specific centers such as sand and water and how these helped their children learn and helped the parents understand learning-through-play. Others mentioned the modeling that the facilitators provided, especially in terms of shared book reading. Overall, then, the structure of the program seemed to work well for the families, especially the "hands-on" nature of it, as one of them noted.

Program Improvement/Issues and Concerns

To recap, all of the interviewed families appreciated the program and were very supportive of it. Nevertheless, there were several areas that they felt could be improved. Although the aim of this study was not to evaluate the program, we believe it is important to share the concerns of the families for several reasons. First, we believe that it is incumbent on us to report what the parents perceived as issues or concerns and not just what they saw as positive. Second, we think that this information is important for program developers and program providers to consider to insure that programs are meeting the needs of participating families. Third, the lack of a more critical stance in family literacy program evaluation has consistently been identified in the literature (e.g., Hannon, 2010; Thomas, 1998), and we believe it is imperative to listen to families' voices when they have suggestions for improvement.

The most frequent suggestion for improving the program was to hold sessions more frequently than the once-a-month schedule that had been followed. This sentiment was captured by the comment below in response to the question about how the program might have been improved:

> The frequency, I guess, the number of times that was available to the children, maybe could have been a little bit more. I am not really sure once a month was enough to, ah, for them to retain the memory of whatever [inaudible].

In terms of optimal frequency, several participants mentioned having sessions "four times a month," another mentioned "two weeks a month," while another opined that, "I do not think that any amount of it would have been too much."

As mentioned earlier, the program reflected a learning-through-play paradigm with activities designed to promote foundational early learning. All of the participants seemed to appreciate this aspect, and indeed, some of them mentioned it. However, one person also felt that not enough attention was paid to helping children learn "sounds" which we interpreted to mean letter–sound relationships or phonics. Also, while some of the participants appreciated the promotion of children's early writing, scribbling, and drawing, one participant

in particular took issue with invented spelling, which we assume her child engaged in later in kindergarten and Grade 1. Seemingly in response to the teachers' encouragement for families to accept and celebrate young children's early writing, she said, "If she [daughter] said like cat, k-t-t, I had to say that was correct. I did not agree with that."

In keeping with contemporary thinking in early childhood education, the developers tried to ensure that open-ended activities (Hertzog, 1998) were provided so that children could engage in them according to their development and levels of proficiency. Interestingly, one participant indicated that the activities were too difficult for some children, while others believed the activities were not challenging enough. It appears, then, that although the parents appreciated and understood some aspects of the child-centered, developmentally appropriate philosophy of the program, other aspects were not as apparent to them, and perhaps more explicit explanation was needed.

Discussion

Because of the relatively small number of participants and the lack of randomization, the results of this study should be interpreted cautiously. As well, it is important to point out that the parents were relying on memories of their participation in the program two decades ago. Although they identified some concerns with the program and offered suggestions as to how it could have been improved, it might be that their recollections are positively skewed. Nevertheless, the findings from this study should be of interest to those concerned about family literacy from theoretical, research, and practical perspectives.

As was indicated earlier, this is the only study that we know of where parents were asked to reflect back on and, we believe, evaluate the efficacy of a family literacy program after their children had completed school and therefore reaped any perceived benefits of participating in it. The separation of years, we believe, allowed the parents to think about the program more objectively, now that they and their children were no longer associated with the school. That they all looked back on the program fairly positively after 20 years and were able to articulate in detail how it supported their children's learning and their own understanding, we believe, speaks to the impact the program had on the families and the children.

In her study comparing and contrasting working class and middle class families' participation in school, Lareau (1987) found that because middle class families felt more comfortable in the school setting than did working class families, they became more knowledgeable about the expectations of schooling and ways that they could support their children's learning. Because they were

more familiar with school routines and policies and the teachers and other personnel, they also were able to advocate on behalf of their children. Lareau also concluded that the clubs and other out-of-school activities that the middle class families had the financial resources, as well as the time, to enroll their children in served as sites where parents networked, exchanging information and knowledge about children, learning, and schooling. We propose that by welcoming families into the classroom, working with them to develop an understanding of curriculum and pedagogy, and supporting them in developing relationships and networks, the family literacy program served to support these working class parents in developing social capital, approximating in many ways that of the middle class families in Lareau's study.

It was beyond the scope of this study to examine the impact of the program on children's literacy and learning. However, Norman (1997) tracked achievement of the first cohort of children to participate in the program and whose parents were interviewed in the current study. For example, comparing Canadian Test of Basic Skills results of this cohort of children in 1993 when they were in Grade 4 with previous Grade 4 cohorts who had participated in the three year assessment cycle, she reported average scores as follows: 20th percentile in 1984; 37th percentile in 1987; 30th percentile in 1990; and 50th percentile in 1993. Norman stated that, "the 1993 results showed the Grade 4 class [the first cohort of children to have participated in the family literacy program] at the 50th percentile…the first…class to [ever] reach these levels" (p. 44). Of course, the design of Norman's study did not allow claims of causality, but as she pointed out, the only factor that seemed to have changed in the school to account for the marked improvement in achievement was the introduction of the family literacy program.

Norman's findings are also consistent with converging evidence that family literacy programs do have a significant impact on children's early literacy development (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Anderson et al., 2011; Brooks et al., 2008; Phillips et al., 2006). In addition, the results of the current study are consistent with those of Swain and Brooks (in press) indicating that family literacy programs can have positive results for parents. For example, the parents reported that the program helped make explicit the knowledge and skills that would support their children's learning once they entered kindergarten. They indicated that they came to understand the learning-through-play philosophy that their children would encounter in the primary grades at school. They also told us that they became aware of exactly how they could support their children's early learning.

The current study also contributes to the growing literature on retrospective interviewing and other methods that tap participants' memories as a way

of measuring the long-term impact of events and experiences in their lives. As previously noted, Anderson and his colleagues used this technique extensively relative to experiences with museums, exhibitions, fairs, and so forth (e.g., Anderson & Shimizu, 2007). As researchers, we were surprised but very impressed at the vividness and detail of the families' memories, and we see this method as being appropriate for examining other family literacy programs. Especially important, we believe, is that families are able to reflect on and evaluate their experiences after having the benefit of seeing their children progress through school and make their way in life now as adults.

Of course, this distancing also allowed the families to offer constructive criticism. For example, nearly all of the families observed that the sessions were too infrequent and that the program needed to have been extended. Participants also identified issues that they found troubling, as in the case of the parent who did not appreciate or understand invented spelling and its role in learning to read and write in English.

Conclusion

Although doubts about the efficacy of family literacy programs persist in some quarters, we believe this study contributes to the converging evidence that family literacy programs can positively impact young children and their families. That is, if the "family, home, and community are the true drivers of a child's education" (National Center for Family Literacy, 2013, para. 3) and families are indeed their child's first and most important teacher, it appears imperative that opportunities be included for them to provide feedback about their experiences in family literacy programs, as we did in this study. This study also suggests that programs such as the one at St. Mary's School can help families develop the knowledge or social capital that will assist them in supporting their children's learning and schooling in the long term. Researchers have tended to focus on the effects of family literacy programs on participants' literacy or more general cognitive development and, although these are obviously important, the results of this study suggest the impact of family literacy programs go beyond these, at least from the perspective of participants. Finally, the study supports the notion that tapping into families' memories of their experiences can yield valuable information that educators and others can utilize as they develop initiatives designed to support young children's success in literacy, in school, and in life.

Endnote

[1]During the study, we met several of the children who had participated in the original program. As young adults, none of them now had any memories of the program, although they recalled hearing their parents occasionally make positive references to it over the years. All 10 children whose parents were interviewed had completed high school, and those we met were doing quite well in their careers.

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Appendix. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

I am working with (_{participants name}) in (_{name of community}) and today is (_{date}).

First, thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview. We are interested in hearing from you about the program that you and your child participated in the year before he or she went to kindergarten at St. Mary's School.

1. Did the program help **you** help **your child** when he or she went to school in kindergarten?

2. If **yes**, in what ways **did it help you help your child** when he or she went to school in kindergarten? If **no**, why do you think the program **did not help you help your child** when he or she went to school in kindergarten?

3. Did the program **help your child** when he or she went to school in kindergarten?

4. If **yes**, in what ways did it **help your child** when he went to school in kindergarten? If **no**, why do you think the program **did not help your child** when he or she went to school in kindergarten?

5. What aspects or parts of the program did you find particularly helpful?

6. In what ways were these parts or aspects of the program helpful?

7. What aspects or parts of the program did you find not helpful?

8. In what ways were these parts or aspects of the program not helpful?

9. Did the program help you help your child as he got older and progressed through the grades?

10. If so, in what ways do you think the program helped your child later on in school as he or she got older and progressed through the grades? (If not, why not?)

11. What else could the school have done to help you support your child in school?

12. The program that was developed at St. Mary's is now used throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. Why do you think it is important for schools to be working with parents as was done in the program you and your child attended?

13. If you were to give advice to schools about working with parents, what would you say?