

Giving children an even break Removing the barriers to literacy

Children and parents working together

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This paper is about inter-generational family literacy (IGFL) programs which are designed to benefit the children of parents in need of literacy education as well as the parents themselves. The paper reports results from a Department of Employment, Education and Training national study of these programs. Of particular importance is the issue of parents' self-esteem and the use of a student-centred approach in adult literacy classes. The issues of recruitment, control, networking and resources are also addressed. Studies are reported which indicate the considerable potential of these programs to benefit children and parents.

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Intergenerational family literacy (IGFL) programs provide literacy education for parents who need it, both to assist the parents, but also with the intention of helping the children's literacy development, through learning processes within the family. Programs of this kind first appeared in the USA in the early 1980s and have only recently appeared in Australia. The Department of Employment, Education and Training commissioned a study of IGFL practice in Australia (Toomey et al 1995) and this paper reports results from that study likely to be of interest to the readership of *Children Australia*. Unless otherwise indicated all results reported are from that study.

The study conducted surveys of adult literacy/ESL (English as a second language) teachers, pre-schools, primary schools and family support workers. It also gained more detailed information from in-depth telephone interviews and follow-up questionnaires. Other methods used were advertising campaigns and extensive networking to identify IGFL programs.

IGFL programs are novel in that they bring together the work of both adult literacy and child literacy teachers, whose professional paths rarely cross. From the literature on child literacy we draw on the evidence of children's

literacy learning within the family, and from adult literacy writing the idea of adult literacy for personal emancipation.

Of central importance is the idea that there are many literacies (Street 1984) and that literacy is a form of social practice which is adjusted to the requirements of particular situations (Taylor 1983; Heath 1982). In other words the literacy required for success in school is only one form of literacy, although historically it has been associated with the social and cultural power of the educated classes (Graff 1979).

A person who in terms of school literacy may be regarded as 'illiterate' may engage in literate acts such as signing a cheque or reading a bus sign, in which their language competence and relevant world knowledge are brought together with the deciphering and production of print to interpret and to convey messages quite effectively. Such a view sees reading, writing, speaking, listening and critical thinking all as part of literacy, as does the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Dawkins 1991). It gives much less value to the formal correctness of the school room than to effective communication in everyday matters.

This has crucial significance both for children's literacy learning within the family and for the development of adults in adult literacy classes (and, indeed, for the literacy development of all adults).

CHILDREN'S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND THE FAMILY

Children growing up in a literate society may acquire much literacy knowledge and competence by their active attempts to understand and master their experience. The role of the family environment at the pre-school stage is crucial here, in the extent to which it offers social practices of literacy as meaningful experiences for the child to engage with. Children who have little contact with the use of print within their family environment are likely to find it confusing and mysterious in their first contacts in school.

Of major importance is parents reading to and with their children, and their encouragement of children's writing. Evidence exists of the effects of parent-child reading episodes upon a wide range of literacy knowledge and competences at the literacy stage, eg, knowledge of concepts about print and book handling skills, letter and word recognition, understanding the functions of print, engaging in reader-like and writer-like activities, a command and understanding of language structures more characteristic of decontextualised written text, the ability to answer quiz-type questions and turn-taking skills of the kind required in school (Heath 1983), metalinguistic knowledge, eg, of the difference between the message and the message carrying medium. (For reviews see: Mason & Kerr 1991; Lancy, Draper & Boyce 1989).

Particularly important is the active mastery of the text by parent and child, as evidenced in discussion of the text. This indicates that use of the text has gone beyond mere literal understanding, as parent and child incorporate these meanings into experience via discussion. This not only facilitates the child's understanding of the meaning of the text, but also develops intellectual skills by which children

learn to perform mental operations on meanings transmitted solely by symbolic means, usually referring to events, objects, processes and ideas not physically present or in some way directly accessible to the sense perception of the receiver of the message.

So much of the work in schools has this character, that is, dealing with the world at a distance purely through symbolic representation. As a consequence children from literacy-rich family environments are likely to be successful on tasks of school literacy (Mason & Kerr 1991; Lancy et al 1989). By contrast one Australian study showed children of parents in need of literacy education were twice as likely as others to be in remedial literacy classes (North Brisbane Adult Literacy Centre 1990).

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A very thorough study of parents and children in the UK longitudinal National Child Development Study found that, in families with low income and one parent having difficulties with reading, 72 per cent of the children were in the bottom 25 per cent in reading scores. Low income and parental weak literacy were additive in depressing scores. To quote the report '... the group who are most at risk of growing up with the lowest levels of basic skills are children from low income families where the parents have poor reading abilities.' (Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit 1994, p. 3).

It is of note then that, typically, adults weak in literacy are not only poorly educated but also socio-economically depressed; in a national sample of regular adult literacy and adult ESL classes 68 per cent were composed

predominantly of students who were long-term unemployed and 81 per cent contained students who had low education.

ADULT LITERACY CLASSES AND STUDENTS

Self-esteem and the student centred approach

For most adult literacy students, experience in school has been one of repeated failure in tasks of school literacy, and their self-confidence tends to be very low.

A sample of adult literacy teachers was asked 'How important do you think is students' low self-esteem as readers and writers in affecting their studies?' Eighty nine per cent said 'Very important' and 10 per cent said 'Important'. Replies to further questions revealed teachers' beliefs that students' experiences also adversely affected the students' general self-esteem and their self-esteem as teachers of their own children.

Moreover, these students often do not recognise as literacy competences the skills they actually possess, because they are not recognised as school literacy skills.

In consequence adult literacy teachers tend to have a very student-centred approach to their teaching. Asked 'How important is it to your teaching that students work on topics close to their own interests/experiences?', 82 per cent indicated 'Very important' and 18 per cent 'Important'. The teachers play to the students' strengths to build up their self-confidence. In the case of students who are parents this will usually mean assisting parents to help in their children's schooling and literacy development. Very often a major motivation of parents enrolling in these classes is to be able to help in their children's literacy development and schooling.

This student-centred approach also appears in the purpose-designed IGFL programs. For example, 'Lesson topics are negotiated with the student according to their interests and needs during discussion, where ideas are exchanged and problems and concerns shared ... Flexibility is the key to all

lessons' (Kogarah Community Aid and Information Centre Inc. 1995, p. 9).

Apart from following individual students' interests, flexibility also makes possible the adjustment of the program to the students' cultural background. Teachers in ten purpose-designed IGFL programs were asked 'How important in your teaching are the following reasons for including, in your class, materials to do with children's learning and the family?' Ninety per cent of respondents rated the following as 'Very important': parents' interest in their children's education; building on student's existing knowledge is an effective teaching strategy; students' interest in their family. Clearly these IGFL programs are very student-centred.

Because of the individualised approach to curriculum it is possible for there to be some, or indeed much, IGFL emphasis in normal adult literacy or adult ESL classes. The study therefore paid much attention to these classes. Surveys of them showed the following themes or texts to appear in the classes: the family, 77 per cent; dealing with schools, 60 per cent; authentic texts from schools, 57 per cent; helping with homework, 35 per cent; children's books, 26 per cent (50 per cent in ALBE [adult literacy and basic education] classes, 12 per cent in adult ESL classes). Some 69 per cent of teachers said they had evidence of their students using their literacy skills with their children or grandchildren.

This makes the situation very different from that in the USA where the use of prescribed curriculum is the norm. It is very common to follow the curriculum laid down for the General Equivalency Diploma, an adult qualification equivalent to high school graduation, which has widespread recognition. In the USA, IGFL practice occurs to an important extent in purpose-designed programs.

It is important to realise that these adults' literacy skills lag much behind their general development, language skills and world knowledge. The opportunities for personal growth are thus very considerable as students learn to develop literacy skills more commensurate with their adulthood, and to leave behind their schooling's legacy of

negative self-worth. The adult education literature is replete with case studies of such growth (eg, Grant 1987) and there is often to be found an emphasis on personal emancipation and growth (Friere 1972). Teachers perceived this as a potential benefit for children; 35 per cent replied that they 'Agree strongly' that '... children benefit most from the enhanced personal development of parents doing ALBE/ESL', with 48 per cent indicating that they 'Agree'. The term 'empowerment' is one frequently encountered in discussion with adult literacy and adult ESL teachers.

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Purpose-designed IGFL programs

These programs bring literacy education to the parent with the deliberate intention of helping parents to foster their children's literacy development. The survey identified 22 such programs in Australia in 1994-95. Some 14 of these were stand alone ALBE or adult ESL programs (9 of them in schools); three were brief literacy-based programs of around 10 weeks duration; three had a separate program for the child as well as the adult; one comprised a network of services, including one-to-one literacy tutoring for the children by a teacher, as well as adult education for the parent; and one supplemented a regular ALBE program for the parent, with home visits to support the parents assisting the child's literacy development.

OTHER ISSUES IN RUNNING IGFL PROGRAMS

Recruitment

Many potential recruits to IGFL programs are likely to view educational institutions with much reserve and many are likely to undertake further education with some misgivings. Issues of parents' confidence and self-esteem are again relevant. For example, Ames, Madhab and Watkins (1991) provided evidence that an important factor in determining the extent to which parents helped their children's school learning at home was their own sense of personal efficacy. Recruitment is important in order to reach out to reticent parents, but also because of the need for classes of a cost-effective size to satisfy funding bodies.

Various authors (Toomey & Taylor 1995; Wilson & Aldridge 1994; Lancy & Talley 1994) have documented the difficulties encountered in the recruitment stage. Nickse (1991) has argued that at least a year is needed for recruitment and ground work with other agencies.

The Ermington Family Learning Centre, which provides the opportunities for educational and personal development for children, and their parents, from disadvantaged families (Hay, Puckeridge, McDonald & Kelly 1995), has a strongly pro-active approach to recruitment and retention, and has worked for some years with the local primary schools. Families are approached individually to take part on the recommendation of the child's class teacher. The parents are encouraged to be present when the children are tutored, but are not required to teach their child. This approach facilitates the parents' recruitment, especially those lacking in confidence.

Toomey (1995) described a study in which a determined effort was made to contact parents of poor readers at one school to involve them in hearing their child read. After numerous home visits the majority of families were eventually successfully recruited. Litwak and Meyer (1974) have also described the benefits from the process of home visiting parents in disadvantaged families, who may not typically have

much contact with their children's schools.

When some adult literacy teachers (10 in purpose-designed IGFL programs and 44 in regular ALBE/adult ESL classes) were asked about the important issues relating to recruitment most of them regarded the following as 'Very important' or 'Important': classes during school hours; availability of child care; flexible attitudes to attendance. With regard to recruitment methods, word of mouth was very effective with a population not responsive to print. Referral by another agency was also quite effective.

The inherent difficulties in recruitment, necessitate funding support to IGFL programs for at least two to three years to provide time to develop recruitment networks and a reputation.

Issues of control and networking

In the purpose-designed projects the issue of divided control between agencies rarely arose as most IGFL programs studied had only one element, an ALBE or adult ESL class.

There was one exception in which an ALBE teacher complained about lack of consultation and lack of definition of the ALBE role in a project where the ALBE class was one facet of the overall program.

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The Literacy in Families Together (LIFT) program (Toomey & Taylor 1995) contained early childhood, adult literacy, parent education and parent/child time together elements. The LIFT team, forewarned by the US experience of difficulty with 'turf' issues, took care to earmark resources for planning time before and during the operation of the

program. Adequate discussion facilitated a cooperative approach. One interesting feature of these discussions was what appeared to be an ideology common to both adult literacy teachers and those in the social welfare field, which emphasised opportunities for personal development and empowerment and their rejection of 'deficit thinking' about the disadvantaged.

With the increasing number of IGFL programs that are developing, there is potential for the control issue to become more significant.

Given the disadvantages frequently experienced by those in need of literacy education, the practice of networking is one that has great relevance to IGFL in order that appropriate cross-referrals are facilitated. A model of IGFL practice proposed in the study relies heavily on cross-sectoral cooperation to enable adults, and their children, to receive or access a comprehensive range of services to enable, support and complement their literacy development (for example, child care, family support and counselling, vocational training, early childhood education).



Resources

IGFL programs differ in the amount of contact time available to the students. Nickse (1991) stressed the need for relatively prolonged contact, and has suggested a minimum of seventy hours for the program to have an impact. If adult growth in literacy competence is considered a necessary component of an IGFL program, it would seem that a minimal level of ALBE needs to be specified. On the other hand, if awareness raising is all that is intended, this may not be so. One valuable role for IGFL programs could be to lead parents into pathways for their further education and/or vocational education. Such activities provide important models for children growing up in households where low educational levels and unemployment may be common.

Programs will usually need to be funded to provide more than literacy instruction for parents and children. The evidence referred to above indicated the value of child care for recruiting. Those programs which supplied child care commented very favourably on its availability, not least because of the opportunities for parent-child contact which it affords within the program.

Transport is also useful. Some US programs deliver the program via home visits (eg, Goldstein 1993) and this may be seen as a benefit from voluntary tutor programs. The 1993-1994 Even Start evaluation (referred to below) found that retention rates were much higher in programs delivered by home visit (St Pierre et al 1995).

There have been instances reported where funding bodies have refused funds for administration, recruiting, child care and excursions. Services such as these are necessities and not indulgences. If the benefits and potential of IGFL programs are to be realised, there needs to be adequate funding. Failure to adequately resource programs which are attempting to redress educational inequality will further perpetuate the cycle of welfare dependency that so often entraps the disadvantaged members of our society.

EVALUATIONS OF AUSTRALIAN IGFL PROGRAMS

The study was not intended as a rigorous evaluation of the effects of IGFL programs but it did provide some relevant evidence and was able in some cases to draw from independent evaluations of the programs, in Australia and overseas.

Whilst IGFL is in its infancy in Australia its potential is highlighted by the following evaluation data.

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The Literacy in Families Together (LIFT) program (Frankston, Victoria)

The evaluation of the LIFT program (Toomey & Taylor 1995) involved assessment of students' literacy development, parents' confidence and participation in reading with their children, program effectiveness and overall evaluation of the syllabus and general processes.

The conclusions were that the processes that had produced the IGFL syllabus were essentially successful and that the basic IGFL idea worked well, that is, parents engaging in assisting their children's literacy development is an effective way of encouraging their own literacy development.

The Queensland University of Technology (QUT) program

In the QUT program the tutors kept a detailed log of their experiences, thus providing case study material for each student. All of the students showed improvements in the following areas: self-confidence, meeting the literacy needs of their children, managing the texts in the programs and managing daily living tasks. Additionally the students' understanding of the term 'literacy' broadened such that they were able to recognise that their existing skills and knowledge could be applied to specific literacy tasks (Campbell 1993).

The Ermington Family Learning Centre (Ermington, NSW)

Kelly's (1993) evaluation of the Ermington Family Learning Centre encompassed questionnaires, interviews and a follow-up study of students. It provided some useful information which was, however, constrained by missing data and time and design limitations.

In essence there were improvements, to various degrees, noted in the following: child literacy and numeracy; child self-esteem and confidence; parent literacy and numeracy (of those attending courses); parental self-esteem (52 per cent of parents); parental involvement in schools; parent-child relationships.

National survey of adult literacy teachers

The study's national survey of adult literacy teachers found that 69 per cent of respondents had evidence of students using their literacy skills with their children or grandchildren. Of those responding affirmatively, examples were provided showing instances of skills being used in relation to children's school work (for example, shared homework time) as well as general literacy (for example, visiting the library or reading for pleasure).

Teachers in 10 purpose-designed IGFL programs were asked about the impact of the IGFL component of their course. At a global level, 60 per cent indicated

that IGFL was 'Very positive' and 20 per cent indicated that it was 'Positive'. More specifically, 90 per cent considered that the IGFL component had a positive effect on reading skills, writing skills and parents' knowledge about children's literacy. Eighty per cent indicated that there was a positive effect on parents' self-esteem as well as parents' discussion skills. Sixty per cent indicated that there was a positive effect on parents' motivation towards the rest of the course. This latter point is good evidence for the value of IGFL courses in dealing with parents' interests in helping their children's literacy and schooling, which then actually provides a stimulus to their own general education.

Evidence from adult literacy students in IGFL programs

Information was collected from adult students in IGFL programs via focussed group interviews (26 students) and as well as a survey instrument (89 students) that could be used as an interview schedule (by the teacher) or as a self-administered questionnaire (by the student). Overall, there was a very positive response to the courses. There were marked gains in helping children's learning at home, parents' confidence in dealing with schools, their own reading/writing, as well as their general self-confidence and self-esteem.

SOME IGFL EVALUATION FINDINGS FROM OVERSEAS

Evaluations from overseas provide evidence which can be useful in the Australian context although the results should be extrapolated with caution. In particular, it should be noted that the dominant model in the USA for purpose-designed IGFL programs provides adult literacy and parent education components for the parents, and an early childhood education program for the children.

Evidence from Even Start in the USA

Even Start is a US federal government funded family literacy program. Evaluation information is available for the 1989-1992 period (St Pierre,

Swartz, Gamse, Murray, Deck & Nickel 1995).

In the period under review, 79 per cent of the adult participants in Even Start had not completed high school and 66 per cent had an annual income of US\$10,000 or less. This indicated that it was reaching its target population.

Clearly such an approach has a good chance of starting to overcome the causes of educational and social inequality which derive from a social system in which inequality is entrenched.

Two forms of evaluation took place. One was an annual survey of all Even Start projects and participating families. The other was an in-depth study of five projects, including 200 project families and control families that had been randomly assigned to these groups.

In the survey of all participating families, some 8 per cent of adults achieved a high school General Equivalency Diploma. In the in-depth study, the figure was 22 per cent for Even Start families compared with 6 per cent for the controls. In a test of adult functional literacy there were statistically significant gains comparable to, or greater than, those found in other studies of adults in regular adult literacy programs. However, the in-depth study did not find a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups. The children in the program made significant gains in their school readiness skills which were greater than would be expected due to maturation alone. These gains, and the gains for adults in literacy, were increased for those with higher levels of program participation.

When considering these results, the differences between the USA and Australian contexts must be kept in

mind. Generally speaking, in the USA, there is no attempt at universal provision of early childhood education. Given that the most popular IGFL models in the USA involve an early childhood education program and that the evaluation has made little attempt to investigate the separate effects of the various components of the program, the impact of the early childhood education aspect cannot be determined. To the extent that children in Australia may be more likely to have received early childhood education, there is the question of whether an early childhood education component in an Australian IGFL program would make an important contribution, over and above that of an adult literacy component, to a child's literacy development.

Evidence from the UK

The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit in London is an adult literacy research and development organisation which received a large UK government grant to carry out work in IGFL. Four demonstration programs were put in place and the National Foundation for Educational Research in the UK was commissioned to carry out a systematic evaluation from January 1994 to December 1995. These IGFL programs, modelled on Even Start, all had components for teaching parents adult literacy, and in helping their children's literacy development; they also provided a companion early childhood course for the children.

The interim report (Brooks, Gorman, Harman, Self & Wilkin 1995) provided data on 68 parents and 77 children. It was found that the recruitment policy of seeking low income working class families had been very successful and that all the quantitative data showed gains (some of which were statistically significant) for various measures of the adults' and children's skills. These improvements were still present after 12 weeks. The evidence from qualitative data supported the quantitative data as well as illustrating such aspects as the social and emotional gains, for example, parents' increased confidence and enjoyment in helping their children.

As with the US situation, the UK does not have universal pre-school education

so there needs to be some caution exercised in relating the results to Australia. Also, being a demonstration project meant that there was a lot of imagination and resourcefulness utilised, making a favourable outcome more likely compared with the 'run-of-the-mill' IGFL programs in the US.

CONCLUSION

Many workers in the social welfare field have probably encountered families in which literacy skills are of concern. Whilst referrals of parents to mainstream literacy programs have been an option in the past there is now a new alternative which recognises more explicitly the familial link in literacy development. Whilst IGFL programs are not yet systematically and routinely available, their potential benefits can provide a stimulus for professionals of various persuasions to work cooperatively together in meeting a range of needs for the families with whom they work.

Whether the IGFL programs work directly with the parents, the children or both, there is a growing body of empirical evidence that gives a very clear indication that there will be gains for the adults as well as their children, which is the essential objective in an IGFL program. Clearly such an approach has a good chance of starting to overcome the causes of educational and social inequality which derive from a social system in which inequality is entrenched. ☼

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