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Representing and Promoting Family Literacy on the World Wide Web: A Critical Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine critically how family literacy is promoted and represented through the images and written texts on Web sites developed by providers of family literacy programs. Naturalistic research over the last 20 years or so demonstrates that the family is a rich site for supporting children's literacy development across socioeconomic and cultural contexts. This research suggests that families engage children in a wide array of literacy activities in their daily experience. Furthermore, many significant others in addition to parents play important roles in children's literacy development. In this study we examined a representative sample of family literacy Web sites from across Canada. Findings suggest that literacy tends to be narrowly defined; responsibility for children's literacy is usually ascribed to mothers; and troubling assumptions about families as being deficient still persist.

Cette étude avait comme objectif d'étudier de façon critique la promotion et la représentation de la littératie familiale par les images et les textes écrits dans les sites Web qu'ont développés les fournisseurs de programmes d'alphabétisation familiale. La recherche naturaliste des vingt dernières années démontre que la famille constitue un milieu propice pour le développement de la littératie enfantine pour tous les contextes socioéconomiques et culturels. Ces résultats permettent de conclure que les familles font participer leurs enfants à toute une gamme d'activités littéraires au quotidien. De plus, plusieurs autres personnes clés jouent un rôle important dans l'alphabétisation des enfants. Lors de cette étude, nous nous sommes penchés sur un échantillon représentatif de sites Web canadiens portant sur la littératie familiale. Nous avons constaté que l'on a tendance à accorder une définition étroite à l'alphabétisation, à assigner à la mère la responsabilité de l'alphabétisation des enfants, et à entretenir des hypothèses troublantes selon lesquelles la performance des familles est insatisfaisante.

That families are potentially rich sites for literacy development is now considered axiomatic by many educators. For example, in her foundational ethnographic study with middle-class families in the northeastern United States, Taylor (1983) found that literacy pervaded their daily lives. Taylor concluded that children participated in the literacy activities and events that occurred in

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their homes as families went about the business of getting things done in their daily lives. Interestingly, she reported that there was little evidence of parents formally teaching literacy skills; rather, the children were immersed in literacy events as part of daily experience.

In a follow-up study, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) worked with inner-city families living in extreme poverty in the same geographical area. Contrary to commonly held assumptions, they found that these families had a high regard for literacy and engaged the children in reading and writing on a regular basis, despite the daunting social and economic circumstances that confronted them. Researchers working in other contexts (Anderson & Stokes, 1984; Reyes, 1992) have drawn similar conclusions, and indeed many educators now accept the notion that literacy is a part of daily life in most families and communities in Western societies.

Whereas much of the research in family literacy has focused on the role of parents, Gregory and her colleagues in the United Kingdom have been examining the role of other significant family members in supporting children's literacy development. For example, in an ethnographic study with eight Bangladeshi and eight Anglo families in a socially and economically disadvantaged area of London, Gregory (2001) documented how siblings supported each other's language and literacy learning at home, focusing especially on the interactions in their play routines. Gregory argued that the learning that occurs through these interactions goes beyond traditional notions of scaffolding and collaborative learning. Instead, she described these interactions "as a synergy, a unique reciprocity whereby siblings act as adjuvants in each other's learning" (p. 309). Gregory's work documents significant ways that young children can support each other, particularly when learning to read and write in a second (or additional) language. More recently, she has been working with families to understand the contributions of grandparents in children's language and literacy development (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004)

Similarly, Tizzard, Schofield, and Hewison (1982), in their study, demonstrated that literacy development does not necessarily entail a more proficient other supporting the less proficient other, a dominant perspective in the educational and research literature. Working with children in six schools in economically disadvantaged areas of greater London, they compared the effects of having: (a) one group of children read to their parents or a significant other; (b) a second group receive remedial help from a trained teacher at school with various aspects of reading; and (c) and a third group of children receive no assistance outside of regular classroom instruction. Comparison of pretest and posttest measures of reading revealed that whereas the children who read each day to a parent (or significant other) made significant gains, the children receiving the additional help and those in the control group did not.

A flurry of research activity followed the publication of Taylor's (1983) foundational book *Family Literacy*. Researchers have subsequently documented that parents and other caregivers support children's literacy in myriad ways, including: (a) encouraging them to write notes, messages, lists, and so forth (Taylor); (b) reading print in the home and community such as signs, books, advertisements, religious materials, notes, grocery lists, and logos (Purcell-Gates, 1996); (c) encouraging language development through conversation and

discussion, and through riddles, rhymes, raps, and songs (Dickinson & Tabor, 2002); (d) teaching in developmentally appropriate ways the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they represent (Senechal & Lefevre, 2002); and (e) providing role models as readers and writers (Anderson, 1995; Gunderson & Anderson, 2003).

Much of the research cited above involved naturalistic documentation of literacy occurring in the daily lives of families. As Purcell-Gates (2000) points out, however, the term *family literacy* has now also come to be associated with family literacy programs or interventions usually aimed at parents and young children. Such programs have been criticized because they are based on deficit notions of family (Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001); promote “school literacy” without recognizing and validating the range of literacy practices engaged in by families in their homes and communities (Auerbach, 1995); and do not live up to expectations in terms of supporting children’s literacy development (Hendrix, 1999). Despite these critiques and the lack of empirical evidence as to their efficacy (Purcell-Gates, 2000; Thomas, 1998), family literacy programs continue to proliferate.

Having worked in family literacy program development and implementation, we were struck by the uncritical way that family literacy is often promoted in the media. As part of an earlier study, we investigated how family literacy programs were represented through images on family literacy Web sites in Canada (Kendrick, Anderson, Smythe, & MacKay, 2003). Essentially, we found that the most frequent image by far was that of a mother reading a book to a single child, even though the research with families clearly portrays a much more complex, elaborate, and nuanced picture of literacy that actually occurs in homes and communities.

The present study is meant to build on the earlier study (Kendrick et al., 2003) in several ways. Although we examined another set of images represented on family literacy Web sites, we also examined the accompanying texts and analyzed the messages that they contained. Furthermore, we were interested in the congruency between the explicit and implicit messages in the images and in the texts. As well, we were curious about what we called the *promises* that were inherent in the texts. That is, we have been troubled by some of the claims made about family literacy. For example former First Lady Barbara Bush proclaimed in an edited volume published by the International Reading Association that family literacy would cure the “literacy problem” in the US (Bush, 1995).

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. Who is represented, in what literacy activities are they engaging, and in what context in images on family literacy Web sites in Canada?
2. Who is represented, in what literacy activities are they engaging, and in what context in texts on family literacy Web sites in Canada?
3. What explicit and/or implicit promises are contained in the texts on family literacy Web sites in Canada?

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed in several theoretical perspectives. First, our work is informed by emerging work in multimodality and social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001). Central to their work is the notion that like written

texts, images have structure and grammar and that how images are structured helps communicate messages to the viewer. Furthermore, they contend, images reflect the prevailing beliefs and values of the social institutions in which they are created. As Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) put it, images

are produced in the context of real social institutions in order to play a very real role in social life—in order to do certain things to or for their readers and in order to communicate attitudes toward aspects of social life and towards people who participate in them, whether authors and readers are consciously aware of them or not. (p. 120)

Moreover, through images, the social positions of those represented in the image and potential viewers are conveyed, consciously or unconsciously. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) use an example of a photograph taken in a classroom in Australia where the Aboriginal students (children) are at an oblique angle to the viewer whereas the two male Caucasian teachers, the chalkboard, and a word list are directly facing the viewer. They contend that the photographer has, “perhaps unconsciously aligned ... with the white teachers and their teaching tools, but not with the Aborigines. The teachers are shown as part of our world, the Aborigines as other” (p. 143). As Kress and van Leeuwen point out, their historical analyses of magazines and newspapers reveal that images have increasingly taken on a more important role, with a concomitant reduction in the role of written text in these media. Simply put, the written word is decreasing in importance as a medium of communication while the role of images increases dramatically.

Our work is also informed by a “literacy as social practices” paradigm (Gregory & Williams, 2000; Heath, 1983). From this perspective, literacy is viewed not simply as an amalgam of cognitive and linguistic skills transferable from one context to another, but also as complex social practices that vary contextually. Clay (1993) summarized this perspective, arguing that the value placed on literacy, the meanings ascribed to it and its functions and uses, and how it is acquired and mediated vary from one context to another.

Our research is also informed by the foundational work of Vygotsky (1987) and other sociocultural learning theorists (Wertsch, 1985). Within this framework and in the context of family literacy, parents and significant others lend the necessary support in learning a literacy skill or concept but hand off the task to the children when they are capable of completing it independently. Thus literacy learning and teaching is conceptualized as entailing an apprenticeship model (Reeder, Shapiro, Watson, & Goelman, 1996).

Emerging work in multiple literacies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) also guides our work. From this perspective, literacy is seen as extending beyond encoding and decoding print, notions that have been the foci of literacy in the past, and includes various forms of constructing and representing meaning. This broader conception of literacy is captured by Eisner (1991), who states, “literacy is broadly speaking the ability to encode and decode meaning in any of the forms used in culture to represent meaning” (p. 14).

And finally, we are mindful of important work in critical literacy (Baker & Luke, 1991). Although we acknowledge that literacy can be transformative and liberating (Cody, 2005; Freire, 1997), it can also serve hegemonic roles in perpetuating inequity in terms of sex, social class, and so forth. We are also

cognizant that literacy is often oversold and does not necessarily equate to social, personal, or economic well-being (Graff, 1979; Rogers, 2003).

Method

For this study we analyzed the images and texts of 65 Web sites designed to provide information about family literacy programs in Canada.

To begin the study we searched the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD, 2002) <http://www.nald.ca/> for all Web sites containing the term *family literacy*. NALD is a “federally incorporated, non-profit service organization which fills the crucial need for a single-source, comprehensive, up-to date and easily accessible database of adult literacy programs, resources, services and activities across Canada” (NALD). It should be pointed out that there is no dedicated funding for family literacy programs in Canada. Many family literacy programs are funded on a project-by-project basis by Human Resources Development Canada, the ministry whose responsibilities include adult education and adult literacy. Because (ostensibly) many family literacy programs have an adult literacy component and because NALD is also maintained by funding from Human Resources Canada, many family literacy programs are listed in this data base. We printed the pages from each of the identified Web sites. Using the Google search engine and the terms *family literacy*, *family literacy programs*, and *children’s literacy*, we then searched thoroughly so as to identify Canadian family literacy Web sites not listed in the NALD database. We next printed the pages that resulted from this search. The NALD data base and this latter Google search yielded 96 sites that we then identified by province. We then randomly selected five Web sites from each province and coded them according to the research questions. A second person who is trained in fine arts then coded the data set in its entirety. Interrater agreements of 93.3% on the images and 97% on the texts were achieved and the differences were reconciled through follow-up discussion.

Results

The first question that guided this study was “Who is represented, in what literacy activities are they engaging, and in what context in *the images* on family literacy Web sites in Canada?” The results of the analysis of the images are presented in Table 1. It should be noted that some Web pages had more than one image whereas others had none.

That the dominant image is that of a mother and her child is perhaps to be expected because as pointed out above, it is often uncritically assumed that it is the mother who is responsible for supporting young children’s literacy development (Mace, 1998; Smythe & Isserlis, 2002). This finding is consistent with that of the earlier study by Kendrick et al. (2003). However, the frequency with which a father and a child were represented was not expected. Although fathers were indeed represented in the images in the earlier study, they were usually depicted as part of a nuclear family of mother-father-child (or children). In a study conducted in the UK, Nutbrown and Hannon (2003) interviewed 148 5-year-old children, about half of whose parents had participated in a family literacy program and the others whose parents had not. The children in both groups reported that their fathers were involved with them in literacy at home. Thus it might be that the images currently in use more

Table 1
Web-Based Images of Family Literacy

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Context</i>
Mother and child (11)	Reading a book (32)	Home (9)
Father and child (8)	Making a book (1)	Unable to discern (5)
Mascot (5)	Homework (1)	Library (3)
Androgynous person (4)	Birdwatching (1)	School (2)
Child (4)	reading homemade book (1)	Outside (2)
Adult and child (3)	Gardening (1)	Family Resource Centre (1)
Mother-father-children (2)	Puppets (1)	Cultural Event (1)
Mother-father-child (2)	Fishing (1)	
Group of children (2)	Art Activity (1)	
Mother and two children (2)	Board Games (1)	
Father and two children (2)	Baking (1)	
Teacher and one student (2)	Aboriginal drumming (1)	
Teacher and students (2)	Computer (1)	
Grandfather and child (2)		
Group of mothers and group of children (2)		
Adult and two children (1)		
Mother and infant (1)		
Infant (1)		
Grandmother and child (1)		

accurately represent father's roles in their children's literacy development than is sometimes assumed.

As was pointed out by Kendrick et al. (2003), the dominant model in family literacy programs is that of an adult transmitting literacy to the child, and this model is clearly most prominent here as shown in Table 1. In her work with immigrant families in inner-city homes in the UK, Gregory (2001, 2005) found that siblings played a much more significant role in supporting each other's literacy development at home than is usually recognized. Similarly, Tizzard et al. (1982) in their classic study documented the benefits that accrued to children in terms of their literacy development as they read to their parents. And although the nuclear family of mother and/or father is the dominant configuration here, Gregory et al. (2004) documented the significant role that grandparents and other family members play in some communities in supporting children's literacy development.

Reading books is by far the dominant literacy activity represented in the images we analyzed. As pointed out above, the research in family literacy clearly shows that families engage in myriad literacy activities and events. Especially cogent here is the absence of writing, even though there is ample evidence that young children across cultures begin writing at a young age (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1983; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984) and that writing is a significant part of the daily literacy experiences in many families (Bissex, 1980). Also apparent here is the lack of attention to oral language, especially as many educators (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002) see oral language as

foundational in terms of literacy development. Furthermore, increasing emphasis is being afforded phonological or phonemic awareness: important aspects of young children's oral language development that can be enhanced effectively through play (Reguish, Anderson, & Lee, 2002) and through riddles, rhymes, songs, and so forth. Moreover, the parents with whom we work report that computers play a significant role in their homes (Anderson, Smythe, & Shapiro, 2005) and the dearth of technology in representations of family literacy in these "new times" is striking.

That the home is the context most frequently depicted is consistent with the findings from the earlier study by Kendrick et al. (2003). There we also reported on a second study in which children in grades 1 and 2 were asked to "Draw a picture of reading and writing." Unlike the images on family literacy Web sites analyzed in the present study and in the earlier study, the children depicted themselves participating in literacy events in a variety of contexts. However, locating family literacy at home is consistent with the prominence of book-reading in family literacy programs. As Kendrick et al. (2003) noted in reference to the children's depiction of literacy,

Home and family literacy for these children means far more than sitting on mother's lap listening to storybooks. The drawings illustrate genres from comic books to novels; they include participants such as siblings, mothers, fathers, grandparents, cousins and friends. The students insert themselves into a range of literacy activities from reading at the beach to writing on the computer, and they demonstrate an awareness that family literacy practices extend far beyond the walls of a home. (p. 252)

The second research question was "Who is represented, in what literacy activities are they engaging, and in what context in the written texts on family literacy Web sites in Canada?"

The dominant model of family literacy represented in family literacy programs entails a parent (or significant other) acting as a conduit for children's literacy, even though naturalistic research with families suggests more complex and diverse patterns. This *conduit* metaphor is certainly dominant in the texts that we analyzed. Interestingly, mothers are mentioned specifically in only two of these texts. However, Smythe and Isserlis (2002) point out that a critical reading of the family literacy literature reveals that the term *parents* is really a proxy for *mothers*, and the assumption persists that it is they who are responsible for supporting young children's literacy development.

Interestingly, however, there is some acknowledgment here in these texts of the roles of extended family members in family literacy. Also noteworthy is that there is at least some acknowledgment of attending to the needs of adult learners in family literacy programs. Mace (1998), in her critique of family literacy programs, points out that family literacy programs tend to render invisible the literacy needs of mothers as their roles are reduced to being conduits for, and supporters of, their young children's literacy development. Somewhat troubling, though, is the identification of high-needs or low-income or uneducated families. In her powerful critique of family literacy programs nearly two decades ago, Auerbach (1989) pointed to the need to move beyond the deficit notions that were pervasive at the time. That this type of discourse can still be found in public documents is troubling.

Table 2
Web-Based Texts of Family Literacy

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Context</i>
Parents, caregivers and children (34)	Reading (30)	Homes (18)
Teachers (7)	Writing (14)	Family resource centre (18)
Extended family (5)	Songs/rhymes (8)	School (8)
Adult learners (3)	Storytelling/oral (8)	Library (7)
High-needs/low-income families (3)	Numeracy (6)	Community events (4)
Mothers and children (2)	Drawing (6)	Unable to discern (3)
Tutors (2)	Crafts (4)	Day-care (3)
Foster parents (2)	Computers (3)	Workshops (3)
Librarians (1)	Play (3)	Church (1)
Seniors (1)	Cooking/recipes (3)	Prison (1)
Parents, caregivers, and infants (1)	Games (3)	Hospital (1)
Home schoolers (1)	Video/audiotapes (2)	Health care centre (1)
Unable to discern (1)	Homework (2)	
Day-care workers (1)	Worksheets (2)	
Elders (1)	Tutoring (1)	
Volunteers (1)	Puzzles (1)	
Youth (1)	Reading signs (1)	
Moms and infants (1)	Listening (1)	
Uneducated families (1)	Radio (1)	
Day home workers (1)		
Classmates (1)		

Although reading books to children is by far the most frequent literacy activity mentioned, a fairly rich array of literacy activities is represented in the texts. For example, writing is the second most frequently cited activity, and there is some acknowledgment of oral language through storytelling, songs, rhymes, and so forth. It is also interesting that numeracy is included on a number of sites. Anderson and Morrison (2000) in the development of the family literacy program titled Parents As Literacy Supporters (PALS) worked with parents in identifying issues and topics that they wanted addressed. Interestingly, parents identified mathematics as one of the topics they wanted to learn more about. The developers designed a module on early mathematics that is now a successful component of PALS (Anderson, Morrison, & Manji, 2005). Also noteworthy is that drawing and crafts are included as literacy activities. Given the multimodal ways that young children make sense of and represent their worlds, it is interesting to see literacy represented in multiple ways. Of note, computers and technology are mentioned here, although as indicated above, we believe they play a much more significant role in many families and homes than is evident in these texts (Anderson, Smythe, & Shapiro, 2005).

That the home is one of the two most frequently identified sites for family literacy is perhaps expected given that it is the context most frequently

depicted in the images. Noteworthy, though, is the fact that formal settings (family resource centers, schools, and libraries) are also named relatively frequently. It becomes apparent that family literacy as represented in these texts is construed as a formal, organized phenomenon. Lost in these texts is the notion that a great deal of literacy occurs in an informal, unplanned, and often unconscious manner as families go about their daily lives in their homes and communities. Again, what is presented here stands in stark contrast to the diverse ways and places including the theater, church, in the neighborhood, at a computer in the parent's workplace that children depict themselves engaging in literacy (Kendrick et al., 2003).

The third question guiding this study was "What explicit and/or implicit promises are contained in the texts on family literacy Web sites in Canada?"

As indicated above, family literacy programs continue to proliferate, but there is generally a dearth of empirical research in this area (Purcell-Gates, 2000). Indeed, Thomas and Skage (1998) asserted that "the level of program evaluation in family literacy amounts to little more than testimonials" (p. 20). Our review of the literature suggests that little has changed in the intervening years since that assertion and that there remains a significant gap in terms of program evaluation and research.

Despite the relative lack of research and evaluation, we found claims being made that appear questionable. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to analyze all these claims in depth, the following examples should give us pause to reflect on some of them. For example, it is asserted on one Web site that "Literacy interaction reduces dependence on public assistance." Another states, "Family literacy builds stronger families and healthier communities." We know of no studies that provide evidence to support these claims. Graff (1979), in his classic analysis, debunked what he called the myth of a causal relationship between literacy levels and social and economic well-being. Indeed, as Auerbach (2005) argues, "just as it is not literacy that leads to cognitive or economic development, it's not literacy per se that leads to social change or community development" (p. 363).

As might be anticipated given the prominence afforded book-reading that we describe above, claims about the potentiality of shared book-reading are offered usually in an uncritical manner. Meta-analyses by Bus, van IJzendoorn, and Pelligrini (1995) and Scarborough and Dobrich (1994) both revealed that book-reading contributed about 8% of the variance in children's literacy development. Although the authors of all these studies differed in their interpretation of this finding, there was agreement that the effects of book-reading on young children's literacy development are less significant than is commonly assumed. Yet we still find claims that "Children who are read to become readers." Such claims are especially troublesome for parents with whom we work whose children struggle with learning to read and with reading despite having been read to voluminously and regularly (and in the "right way," according to the advice experts).

Claims about the potentiality of book-reading also extend beyond the academic and cognitive domains and into the social realm. It is stated on one Web site that "Family relationships are enriched through book sharing," whereas another claims that "Reading brings family members closer together

and strengthens their bonds." However, as Scarborough and Dobrich (1994) point out, some children even in high-literate homes do not enjoy book-reading. But as they elaborate, many parents persist in reading to children who dislike the experience, creating the "broccoli effect in reading" analogous to parents insisting that children who dislike broccoli eat it "because it is good for you." In a three-year intervention project, Janes and Kermani (2001) attempted to teach immigrant parents to read from popular children's books in a dialogic manner promoted in the extant literature. Videotape analysis, however, revealed that these sessions were tension-filled affairs. Modifications to the program that encouraged the parents to construct their own texts with moralizing content and to share them in highly didactic ways resulted in a much more pleasant and natural experience. Interestingly, the caregivers remembered shared reading in their own childhood as an unpleasant affair that they saw as punishment. Again, these examples should cause developers and providers of family literacy programs to constrain what they claim will result from such programs.

Discussion

It is important to reiterate that in Canada, there is no mechanism for sustained funding of family literacy programs. Program providers depend on donations from charitable organizations, piecemeal funding from government agencies, fundraising, and volunteers or underpaid workers to sustain the programs. Unquestionably, good intentions are behind all of these efforts.

The results of this study suggest that a narrow perspective of family literacy is depicted on Web sites created by program providers in Canada. This depiction is incongruous with naturalistic research that has documented the multifaceted and socially contextual ways that families engage in literacy in their daily lives in their homes and communities. Although the texts on these Web pages represent a more diverse and contemporary view of family literacy than do the images, traditional notions that family literacy involves parents reading books to children also predominate. These findings are consistent with those of Smythe and Isserlis (2002) in their analyses of print forms of family literacy promotional literature such as brochures and so forth. As well, we randomly selected and examined a number of Web sites from various countries, and the findings were consistent with the analyses reported here.

At times it appears to us that family literacy programs have almost become synonymous with reading books to children. We conjecture that this might be due to the influence of school literacy. At the height of the whole-language movement, Pellegrini (1991) cautioned educators that storybook-reading in schools was becoming the literacy event par excellence, seen as *the way* into literacy. As Pellegrini and others have explained, book-reading to young children is a cultural practice that is specific to certain sociocultural groups, and educators disadvantage some children by placing so much emphasis on it in early literacy instruction. Thus we believe the centrality afforded book-reading in schools has been transposed uncritically to family literacy programs.

Of course, what is represented on these Web sites might not reflect what actually happens in the programs where a more multifaceted and complex understanding of family literacy is actualized. However, if this is the case, we need to understand why the limited depictions of family literacy prevail. To

this end, further research is needed to help understand why those responsible for creating Web sites (and other promotional literature) use the images and the texts that they do. It might be, of course, that program providers are representing family literacy as they understand it. If so, this indicates a need to provide training for family literacy program providers to help them develop a richer understanding of the complexity and diversity of family literacy in our increasingly globalized world. It might also be, of course, that family literacy is depicted as it is in an attempt to placate those who provide funding. Images of a mother and child cuddled up at home sharing a favorite storybook are emotionally powerful no matter what the social realities and the literacy practices of program participants might be.

As we examined and read through this corpus of material, we were struck by the continuing presence of deficit language. It is disconcerting to encounter the cherubic images of contented families sharing storybooks juxtaposed on the same page with allusions to “social assistance,” “poor parents,” “low literate families,” and the like. In addition to being inaccurate in that many families living in poverty value literacy and engage in literacy practices (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), such messages are also paternalistic and disturbing. Auerbach (1995) a decade ago warned that although most family literacy programs purported to operate from a perspective of building on the strengths of families and communities, deficit assumptions still underpinned many of them. Unfortunately, this still seems to hold in some cases.

Of course, little is known about the effect of explicit and implicit messages on readers and viewers, and further research is needed in this area. In this regard, Nichol is undertaking a study in Australia in which she will document how families interpret materials from Web sites (S. Nichols, personal communication, May 15, 2005). Her work will complement the research reported here.

Furthermore, as Stooke (2005) points out from her analysis of advice texts for parents, through their discursive practices, authors position families and literacy in particular ways. In a follow-up study, we draw on the emerging field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA, Fairclough, 2003; Rogers, 2004) for deeper analyses of the texts that we have surveyed more descriptively in this study. Especially important from a CDA perspective is the tenet that texts are not neutral but ideologically positioned. As Fairclough puts it, “Discourses include the representations of how things might or could have been as well as imaginaries—representations of how things might or could or should be” (p. 207), according to the position of the producer in the social world.

Conclusion

Our analyses reveal that family literacy as represented on program Web sites depict narrow conceptions of family literacy. There is also some incongruence between the messages conveyed by the images and those conveyed by the texts that accompany them. The Internet is increasingly becoming accessible to all segments of society, and thus it is important that the messages that we provide families and family literacy program providers accurately reflect what we know about the many ways that children’s literacy can be supported in the context of the family. Furthermore, it is imperative that we recognize and value all literacy activities and practices of families, not just those from the

mainstream culture. To do otherwise, we believe, is unfair to the families with whom we work.

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J. Anderson, J. Strelasky, and T. Anderson

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