WHAT (ACTUALLY) MATTERS IN LITERACY EDUCATION: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the critical role community psychology theories played in reframing literacy research involving mainly Māori and Pacific peoples' extended families and communities. Within a critical social constructionist paradigm, ecological systems theory and holistic, integrative theories of wellbeing brought much-needed new thinking to how family-focused adult literacy education might be theorised and practiced. This reframing marks a challenge to and movement away from still-dominant Western individualistic, behavioural orientated, skills-based and formal economy-focused ways of thinking about people's literacy abilities. It highlights the important role of community psychology in developing theory, informing policy and enhancing practices in culturally diverse education settings to achieve both educational and quality of life aims. Improving quality of life is not possible through literacy education in and of itself, but rather through the inculcation in programme design and delivery of those things which are fundamental and critical to the participants' overall wellbeing and welfare.

KEY WORDS: Family literacy**,** adult literacy, wellbeing, ecological systems theory, community psychology, Māori, Pacific peoples, whānau

In contemporary society much oxygen has been exhailed and column inches devoted to concerns related to a perceived reduction in literacy levels in our population. Much of the debate dominating public discourse assumes an overly narrow view of literacy as pertaining to the ability to read. Such a narrow view is not adopted in this article. 'Literacy', more broadly defined, refers to the many ways people communicate and make sense of the world. There are many text forms and meanings of literacy – many litera*cies*. Text forms include alphabetic text, oral presentation, performance, art and graphics, and they may be combined, as in, for example, computer technology or kapa haka (Māori song and dance performance). Literacy involves skills required to use text forms (such as strategies to decipher a bus timetable). Further, it involves the meaningful use of these skills in particular social and relational contexts (identifying which bus to catch to get to the market or negotiating the morning household routine so the bus to work is not missed). When literacy is defined broadly in this way, it is clear that everyone has some literacy and literacy is always purposeful. It can be thought of as a social practice essential for people's participation in family, community and society.

Programmes aimed at improving literacy abilities reflect choices concerning what kinds of literacy people need or want, who this literacy is for and how they will benefit. While there are many options, programmes are often mired in the dominant, narrow, Western perspectives of literacy and its purposes, often focusing on skills for further, higher level education or paid employment. These literacies are important for many people but other literacies are also important in daily family and community life.

The study on which this article is based focused on adult literacy programmes in which family members were also involved or were expected to benefit. The study used broad and inclusive meanings of literacy, and a holistic, integrative notion of wellbeing as a framework with which to make sense of the value of these programmes to the adult participants, their families and their communities. This article shows the

important contribution made by theories from community psychology to achieve a fuller understanding of the effects of these kinds of programmes than is usual from evaluations of such programmes.

In this paper, we first explain the context for the study, the ecological systems-based social and wellbeing theories used in the study and, briefly, the research method. We then present the key principles and practices that reflected programme staff beliefs and values about literacy and about people; followed by an overview of the effects and the effects process. We present one participant's experiences of the programme. Finally, we draw conclusions.

FAMILY-FOCUSED ADULT LITERACY IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

In Aotearoa New Zealand, family-focused adult literacy programmes form part of a response to concerns by literacy educators; Māori, Pacific and other communities; and government about low levels of ability among adults in the kinds of literacies that could enable increased participation in their family and community lives and society. Government frames this need in terms of being able to function well in a modern knowledge-based economy and society (Ministry of Education, 2001). The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (Udy et al. 1996) showed about 1 million New Zealand adults had literacy levels below those thought necessary to 'function well' in these terms. It sparked a decade of infrastructural development by Government aimed at improving adult levels in the kinds of literacy thought important and measured in the IALS. Half-way through the development period, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) (Satherley et al. 2008) showed some, but not much, improvement. A third survey – the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) – is due.

The infrastructural development work began in 2001 with the launch of *More Than Words: Kei Tua Atu i te Kupu: The New Zealand Adult Literacy Strategy* (the Adult Literacy Strategy) (Ministry of Education 2001). This and subsequent policy documents focused on one kind of English language literacy and numeracy which predominates in our major societal institutions (such as schools and health services). This kind of literacy is seen as comprising a particular set of skills which 'reside in people's heads' (Gee 2008). The skills involved are regarded as essential for economic and social progress. This singular, individualistic, skills-based view of literacy stands in contrast to that presented in our opening paragraph where literacy is described as a multiple phenomenon and as social practice.

From the outset, many Māori educators did not consider that the Adult Literacy Strategy reflected a Māori perspective of what literacy is and what its purposes are, putting forward a different way of thinking about literacy in *Te kāwai ora: Reading the word, reading the world, being the word* (Te Kāwai Ora) (Māori Adult Literacy Working Party 2001). Te Kāwai Ora described literacy in the context of differing worldviews of Māori and Pākehā, rights of and obligations to Māori under the Treaty of Waitangi and, generously and powerfully, in the context of nationhood. As well as providing a basis on which literacy work for all New Zealanders might be carried out, the report defined literacy in specifically Māori terms.

For Māori, literacy includes both English and Māori languages (bi-literacy); oral linguistic traditions, performance and text; and other forms such as tribally significant land features, objects and their locations. For Māori, the purposes of literacy are to enable them to live as Māori and as global citizens. Living as Māori involves seeing oneself as connected to all things and not above them (A Durie 1997). Recent adult literacy policy documents articulate, more strongly than in the past, a commitment to improving Māori and Pacific people's literacy levels through approaches that will attract and retain them and ensure their success (Tertiary Education Commission 2010). However, there is little evidence of collaboration to achieve this. Neither does it address the fundamental differences between Māori and government in meanings and purposes attached to literacy and ways of being 'literate'.

Although poorly supported in government policy and funding, family approaches in adult literacy are highly valued by practitioners, adult learners and their families and some government officials (Benseman & Sutton 2005; Furness 2009, 2012; May et al. 2004). Research conducted by the first

author on one pilot cluster of a project carried out by Literacy Aotearoa confirmed the approach was valued by participants and by the schools and early childhood education centres involved as partners (Furness, 2013). Internationally, studies have shown mixed but generally positive effects (Brooks et al. 2008). At the same time many educationists have noted that more needs to be known including the meaning of programmes to participants (cf. Hannon 2000). Reder's (2012) work in the US on measuring changes in literacy practices has contributed to understanding the wider effects of literacy. The few evaluations of family-focused programmes in New Zealand have found, in addition to enhanced literacy skills, improved 'confidence' (Benseman & Sutton 2005) and 'ripple' ('flow-on') effects to other aspects of participants' lives and to other people in their social networks (Benseman & Sutton 2005; May et al. 2004). The recently trialled Māori Literacy-Wellbeing Framework (Hutchings et al. 2013) reflects the strong desire by Māori to be able to identify, record and give recognition to the valued outcomes of these programmes beyond the limited range of literacy skills that can now be captured systematically. These developments echo acknowledgement of the limits of measuring changes in a narrow set of literacy skills alone.

The need to think about family-focused adult literacy programmes in ways which could accommodate breadth and inclusivity led to drawing on an integrative notion of wellbeing as a new way of thinking about family literacy programmes. It was hoped that a wellbeing-focused framework or frameworks could transcend the dichotomies in adult and family literacy theory and lead to programmes that were relevant and useful to whānau in their daily family and community life. This would require programmes to respect the diversity of families, understand the structural difficulties they face and recognise the strengths and abilities of family members. Applying systems-based social and wellbeing theories enabled this critical shift.

SYSTEMS-BASED SOCIAL AND WELLBEING THEORIES

We drew on ecological systems theory, network theory and holistic integrative theories of wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner 1979; M Durie 1998; Gottlieb 1981; Marks et al. 2000; Nelson & Prilleltensky 2005; Stansfield, 1999). Ecological approaches, the common thread in these theories, are relevant in understanding social life generally and in understanding wellbeing specifically. They also traverse both education and community psychology scholarship. For instance community and applied social psychologists alike will be familiar with the notion that human development is best understood in reference to structural ecosystems (Marks et al. 2000; Drewery & Bird 2004). Classically, Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains this process as:

> the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which these settings are embedded (p. 13).

Community psychologists Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005, p. 71) describe the 'ecological metaphor' simply as "the interaction between individuals and the multiple social systems in which they are embedded". It conceptualises individuals, groups and communities as occupying niches within an ever-changing ecosystem in which the component parts are inter-dependent. Although for analytic purposes the entities of individuals, groups and communities are distinguished this approach does not accept the model of the autonomous individual or lonely thinker endemic in Anglo-American psychology. People, groups and contexts are all inseparable parts of an integrated whole. Changes in one part or level of the system will almost inevitably result in changes in other parts. For example, macro-economic changes half a world away may force the closure of a particular enterprise, resulting in massive dislocation in a local community and give rise to the need for that community to adapt to the new conditions (for example, by finding new ways of utilising traditional skills to create new economic endeavours). Relatively new in Western psychology, ecological frameworks are commonplace for Māori and other indigenous communities for whom they have been fundamental for many thousands of years. Ecological theories underpin a holistic integrative way of thinking about wellbeing. For community psychologists the 'ecological metaphor' constitutes the key paradigm in wellbeing and relational notions of health

(Angelique & Culley 2007). Relatedly, network theory was also helpful in explaining how the connections between people set up the possibility of social support, social capital, social inclusion and social cohesion (Furness 2012).

The present research drew from Nelson & Prilleltensky's (2005) ecological systems-based model of personal, relational and collective wellbeing as its overarching wellbeing framework. Self-determination, caring and compassion, and health are needed for personal wellbeing. Respect for diversity and participation and collaboration are needed for relational wellbeing. Support for community structures, and social justice and accountability are necessary for collective wellbeing (Nelson & Prilleltensky 2005). All parts of the model – the individual, relationships and the collective structures in which people are enmeshed and live their lives – need to be in a state of wellbeing for the overall health of the person to be supported. For example, in the scenario above, individuals are unlikely to lead fully healthy lives unless the economic challenges are successfully met at a community level, which will in turn likely enhance relational wellness (for example, removing the stress that unemployment can have on family relationships). As a holistic, integrative framework the ecological approach was consistent with certain culturally based perspectives on wellbeing, including Māori and Pacific perspectives. Such perspectives acknowledge the link between personhood and the extended family networks in which the individual is embedded (for example, whānau (Māori) and aiga (Samoan)). These links extend to genealogical links (whakapapa in the case of Māori) and the relationship with ancestral land (whenua) and significant waterways (awa). Moreover, health is seen as encompassing not only the physical (tinana) but also the spiritual (wairua), the mind (hinengaro) and emotions (whatumanawa) (M Durie 1998; Pere 1991; Pulotu-Endermann 2001). M Durie (1998, p. 71) describes Māori health as "an interrelated phenomenon rather than an intrapersonal one" in which "poor health is typically regarded as a breakdown in harmony between the individual and the environment".

Such thinking reflects conceptualisations of wellbeing as including persona, cultural, situational and ideological components: that is, wellbeing is defined and realised differently by different groups of people in different situations, where some ideas about wellbeing are more valued than others. Historic antecedents to wellbeing, such as colonisation in countries such as New Zealand, are acknowledged in these frameworks (Glover et al. 2005). The place of values in wellbeing is evident in the goal of social ("distributive") justice which permeates their framework. The balancing of self-determination, autonomy and independence with shared responsibility, obligation and interdependence, are regarded as central concerns in the achievement of wellbeing (Nelson & Prilleltensky 2005). The dominance of individualistic worldviews is recognised as often problematic for non-dominant groups with differing cultural practices and perspectives. However, even in modern, global consumerist society where individualism is valued, unmitigated individualism is recognised by some as counter-productive to the common good (Damon 1995; Etzioni 1996; Sen 1999a, 1999b cited in Nelson & Prilleltensky 2005). This necessarily includes the accommodation of differing ways of being in and of perceiving the world that different people or groups may have.

Inherent in our discussion of wellbeing, particularly the relational aspects, is the idea of participation in community life and the notion of citizenship. Perhaps not surprisingly for a study of family literacy, our conceptualisation of well-being encompassed Friere's notion of citizenship; that is, "the use of rights and right to have duties as a citizen" (1988, p. 7 cited in Stromquist 1997, p. 97). The general idea here is that interventions which enhance literacy (broadly defined) are expected to increase the ability of individuals and groups to participate as citizens, both benefiting from, and contributing to, the health of the collectivities to which they belong, in a reciprocal process which increases their own wellbeing.

THE STUDY IN BRIEF

Drawing on culturally appropriate methodologies, the study traced the experiences of nineteen adult participants in four family-focused adult literacy programmes located in various communities in New Zealand. The research was undertaken within a social constructionist paradigm; the study findings are an interpretation of the phenomenon investigated (Crotty 1998; Denzin & Lincoln 2008). In questioning

the often taken-for-granted meanings of 'family', 'family literacy' and 'family literacy programmes', the approach was a critical one.

The programmes included varied combinations of individual tuition in the dominant literacy, computer skills, group work on social interaction and communication, how schools 'work', driver licenses, parenting information and skills, literacy related to personal interests and aspirations, critical thinking, te reo Māori and tikanga Māori. Programmes also included various forms of social support including emotional support and practical help (often shared and/or reciprocated among the participants), counselling and referral to agencies. Eight participants were Māori, seven were from Pacific Islands (Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands), three were Pākehā and one was Indian. Aged from 19-65 years, all but one were women. Most were raising or supporting the education of children or grandchildren, one lived with her adult son and one was expecting her first child.

Seventy-nine repeated conversational interviews were conducted with the adult participants, programme staff and others who knew participants well over 18 months. There were 12 participant observations of programme sessions, and programme documentation was reviewed. All data was analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke 2006). Data collection and analysis focused on changes in participants' lives that were linked to programme participation and how these 'flowed on' to their families and communities. Literacy and social changes, their links to wellbeing and how these links occurred were explored. The overarching question was: "What is the contribution of adults' participation in family literacy programmes to the wellbeing of individuals, families and communities?" Specifically, the study asked: "What programme effects occurred?" "Who was affected and how?" "How were the effects linked to wellbeing?" "What seemed to be the important elements for achieving beneficial effects?" "What ways can family literacy programmes be delivered?"

FINDINGS

Whilst their design differed, programmes shared common principles and practices (see Furness, 2012). Briefly, the dominant literacy was seen as useful to have but as one of many literacies and not the only important one. Literacy was seen as partly skills and partly individual activity, but primarily as social activity; in other words, literacy and numeracy learning was interwoven with the contexts of people's lives. Taking a critical approach was highly valued and encouraged. Although wanting to develop their literacy, participants were regarded as already skilled in many ways, as multifaceted, and as cultural beings. Children were seen as needing support, yet adults who were parents were also viewed as people in their own right. The programmes shared an overarching concern for people's wellbeing and welfare. Staff saw that human needs must be met in these programmes as in all human endeavours. Overall staff had a strengths, trust and rights-based view of people based on respect for people's ways of being and for diversity. Staff expressed trust in people's abilities and capacities. They shared a fundamental belief in the rights of all people to participate and to have a say, to have fair access to resources and to have reasonable quality of life within the capacity of a nation to provide it. This was a broad and inclusive view of literacy – as social practice – and an inclusive and strengths-based view of people. It was very clear that wellbeing was at the forefront of programme staff thinking and actions in their literacy work.

Six groupings of effects were found. In the first group, participants acquired new literacy knowledge, skills, or practices or learned to use their existing literacy knowledge, skills and practices in new ways. Second, participants acquired knowledge, skills and practices relevant to everyday life that are not so obviously literacy; for example, establishing household routines that work for the family. Third, participants acquired new knowledge, skills and practices related to the wider context of the programmes. For example, participants in the school-based programmes developed deep knowledge of schools and schooling. Fourth, participants experienced positive social and relational events and changes – beyond those connected to the taught literacy content – which also often had positive impacts on their families or their communities. Such effects included receiving practical help and advice on personal issues, having warm and respectful relationships with tutors, being included in all aspects of learning and enjoying the social aspects of the learning process. Fifth, participants' valued the tangible ways in which programme staff communicated their valuing of people and their differences,

inclusiveness, children and families, parents as adults in their own right, education and learning, and people's right to know, to participate and to have a say. Lastly, participants experienced affirmation and building of positive identity in which their self-view, including the cultural aspects, was strengthened, they were more aware of and confident in their abilities and saw themselves as capable citizens and valuable contributors to their families, communities and society. Examples were enhanced sense of selfhood, more positive general self-evaluation and confidence, more positive self-evaluation of their literacy, new or strengthened self-awareness of their abilities and capacities, increased participation in family and community life and increased criticality.

In addition, we found three consistently present overarching characteristics of the programme effects. The first of these was *interconnectedness*. The programme principles and practices were interconnected with the personal circumstances and sociocultural histories of the participants and with the participants' experiences and learning from situations external to the programme. Literacy learning and teaching approaches, as the official focus of the programmes and as social practice, were integral to this approach. The categories of effects were interconnected as were effects within the categories. The second overarching characteristic was that there were always *'flow on'* effects to wide aspects of the participants' lives and to their families and communities. These 'flow on' effects were linked to the wellbeing of participants, their families and communities in varying ways. The wellbeing effects could be identified at the personal, relational and collective levels (Nelson & Prilleltensky 2005). The *personalisation* of the pathways people journeyed constitutes the third overarching characteristic of the programme effects. Paula's story below exemplifies the effects of the programme on participants, their immediate and extended family and their communities.

PAULA'S STORY

Paula (not her real name) and her whānau lived in a small rural community of about 400 people mostly connected to the local iwi. Paula's son and daughter attended the primary school where the programme she participated in was based. A widow, she and her children lived with her parents and her grandfather. A government agency paid her to undertake some caregiving duties for her grandfather. She was a local person, Maori, and actively involved with her marae. She had grown up in an environment of strong whānau connectedness and caring; her parents often looked after other children as well as their own. Her mother was an active learner throughout her life.

The programme Paula participated in taught adults in the community how to use a relationship-based children's oral language development programme called 'Hei Awhiawhi Tamariki ki te Panui Pukapuka' ('HPP') (Atvars et al. 1999). The 'reading tutors' used the programme with Year 1 and 2 children at the school who were below their chronological age in reading and oral language development. While learning and using HPP the adults were encouraged to reflect on their own skills, interests and goals and to apply their learning in their personal and whānau contexts. They were employed as teacher aides (in Paula's case as the school librarian), undertaking other tasks in school which provided further useful experiences and learning. In these ways literacy learning was fully interwoven with the social and educational practices of the programme. The school principal and the project director (who jointly taught and monitored the programme) reflected in their actions the values and beliefs described earlier as common across all programmes. They emphasised the importance of whānau, relationships and connectedness, shared ideas on wide-ranging aspects of parenting and home management as an informal part of the programme, constantly reflected back to the adults their existing and growing skills and abilities and their importance for their own lives, their families and the community.

Paula tutored a child for a ten week block. The child showed improvement on the assessments used in the programme and was also clearly happier at school as observed by the school principal. The early success experienced by the child demonstrated that Paula had learned the critical elements of the literacy practices of the programme: she was able to build a warm, trust-based relationship with the child, apply the oral language development skills (and other reading and language skills as time permitted) and have fun with the child engaging with books and learning. (She continued with another tutor when Paula left.)

Paula had been the school librarian for some time before beginning the programme. She loved books and knew what kinds of books children liked. Her librarian role gave her access to useful information as she completed a National Certificate in Iwi Maori Social Services (NCIMSS) through Te Wananga o Awanuiarangi which she was doing simultaneously. Her goal was to become a youth counsellor. As part of the certificate she was engaged in a project seeking improved access to her marae during periods of flooding which involved considerable study of law, consultation with local landowners and documenting of their viewpoints, all further valuable knowledge and skills.

Paula linked the improved relationships she enjoyed with her own children to participating in the programme. Her increased presence in the school initially caused tension as the children felt they could not be themselves and she felt she must address any bad behaviour she saw. The Principal helped her to understand her role in relation to her children while she was in the school, illuminating the notion of personal-professional boundaries. She and her children negotiated how they would be with each other which led to better relationships both in and out of school. Impressed with the change they observed in the tutored child (in the playground), and listening to Paula's explanation of the importance of reading and learning, her own children began reading each night before going to sleep and doing their homework of their own volition.

With increased confidence in her growing knowledge and relational skills, Paula left the area to take up a placement for the next level in her qualification (a diploma), taking her son with her. The increase in her knowledge of how to use professional vocabulary and how to be professional in the school setting helped her write her resignation letter to the school in a way which satisfied her. She lived temporarily with her sister and brother-in-law where she modelled how to have full conversations with her nephews, a practice their parents then took up. This meant the parents knew a lot more about what their children did at school and how they felt, and boded well for their relationships and understanding of each other in the future. The knowledge of schools Paula had acquired through the programme and her librarian role led to her asking questions of, and asserting her point of view with, the school her son began to attend, ensuring he was best placed within the school and appropriately supported and challenged in his learning. She was also able to ask questions of, and express her opinion to the builders, painters and her future landlord as her house was renovated. She applied for jobs, securing one for the first time and later securing a placement for the diploma – as a child advocate with a government agency. It was in this role we see very strongly Paula's learning and experiences coming together several months after her programme participation and in a different context and community.

One of her cases involved a child accused of a serious misdemeanour at school. He had been interviewed by the school principal and other school staff members without a support person present. The parents had taken him out of that situation but did not know if they had done the right thing. They later received a request from the Board of Trustees to meet with them, a letter they had trouble making sense of. The child and the parents were not communicating with each other and the case worker, who was related to the family, was struggling to help them. Paula used her relationship building skills from the programme to build rapport with the family enabling her to establish the child's version of events which the parents, school or case worker had not yet heard. Paula's NCIMSS training provided strategies for the parents and the child to rebuild trust between them that had broken down. She used her school knowledge, her comprehension strategies, and her expanding vocabulary gained through her engagement in the programme to help the family decipher the official correspondence, and she drew on her legal knowledge from NCIMSS to clarify for the parents and the child what their rights were. Collectively these actions helped prevent a miscarriage of justice. She also helped the case worker clarify his own personal-professional boundaries and increased his knowledge on points of law which boded well for his ability to help other families in the future. When Paula's grandfather died she returned to her community where she very quickly became involved in the local Kōhanga Reo, becoming its chairperson.

CONCLUSIONS

Paula's story demonstrates the wide-ranging and far-reaching effects that may occur through adults' participation in family-focused adult literacy programmes. These effects are literacy, social and wellbeing-related and occur for the participant over space and time and for other people in their social networks: they 'ripple out' or 'flow on' from the immediate, primary focus of the programme. Paula's story also demonstrates the complexity of the pathway from participation to enhanced wellbeing. Programmes are influenced by the values, beliefs and programme practices of staff, the participants' personal histories and current circumstances and other experiences and learning they engage in. The effects are then experienced by the adult, and by their children, other family members, their wider whānau and their communities. While layered and complex the effects process is nevertheless tangible. The benefits and the pathways to them are always highly personalised and idiosyncratic but are not arbitrary.

The ecological systems-based social and wellbeing frameworks used in this study were essential to more fully understanding the effects of the programme and its contribution to individuals, families, communities and society. The ecological approach required that broad and inclusive meanings of literacy and holistic and integrative meanings of wellbeing provided the lenses through which the effects and processes of the programmes were viewed. We then looked with more open eyes through the multiple parts and levels of the social systems in which the adult was embedded to see what effects changes in one part made had on other parts. It was also clear that the adults and others in their networks benefitted personally, relationships were enhanced and there were also levels of collective benefit for families, extended families and communities.

Given what we found, we argue that the full impact and meaning of participating in programmes such as those in the study cannot be understood, or their critical importance appreciated, if change in a limited range of literacy skills is the only dimension observed and measured. Further, the field can be transformed by bringing a focus on social justice where people's wellbeing is the overarching and most important concern. If wellbeing is the goal, which social justice dictates, the perspectives of the participants and their communities must determine the shape of programmes and how their success is measured.

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