

Wellbeing Effects from Family Literacy Education: An Ecological Study

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Abstract : Background and significance: This paper describes the first use of community psychology theories to investigate family-focused literacy education programmes, enabling a wide range of wellbeing effects of such programmes to be identified for the first time. Evaluations of family literacy programmes usually focus on the economic advantage of gains in literacy skills. By identifying other effects on aspects of participants' lives that are important to them, and how they occur, understanding of how such programmes contribute to wellbeing and social justice is augmented. Drawn from community psychology, an ecological systems-based, culturally adaptive framework for personal, relational and collective wellbeing illuminated outcomes of family literacy programmes that enhanced wellbeing and quality of life for adult participants, their families and their communities. All programmes, irrespective of their institutional location, could be similarly scrutinized. Methodology: The study traced the experiences of nineteen adult participants in four family-focused literacy programmes located in geographically and culturally different communities throughout New Zealand. A critical social constructionist paradigm framed this interpretive study. Participants were mainly Māori, Pacific islands, or European New Zealanders. Seventy-nine repeated conversational interviews were conducted over 18 months with the adult participants, programme staff and people who knew the participants well. Twelve participant observations of programme sessions were conducted, and programme documentation was reviewed. Latent theoretical thematic analysis of data drew on broad perspectives of literacy and ecological systems theory, network theory and holistic, integrative theories of wellbeing. Steps taken to co-construct meaning with participants included the repeated conversational interviews and participant checking of interview transcripts and section drafts. The researcher (this paper's first author) followed methodological guidelines developed by indigenous peoples for non-indigenous researchers. Findings: The study found that the four family literacy programmes, differing in structure, content, aims and foci, nevertheless shared common principles and practices that reflected programme staff's overarching concern for people's wellbeing along with their desire to enhance literacy abilities. A human rights and strengths-based view of people based on respect for diverse culturally based values and practices were evident in staff expression of their values and beliefs and in their practices. This enacted stance influenced the outcomes of programme participation for the adult participants, their families and their communities. Alongside the literacy and learning gains identified, participants experienced positive social and relational events and changes, affirmation and strengthening of their culturally based values, and affirmation and building of positive identity. Systemically, interconnectedness of programme effects with participants' personal histories and circumstances; the flow on of effects to other aspects of people's lives and to their families and communities; and the personalised character of the pathways people journeyed towards enhanced wellbeing were identified. Concluding statement: This paper demonstrates the critical contribution of community psychology to a fuller understanding of family-focused educational programme outcomes than has been previously attainable, the meaning of these broader outcomes to people in their lives, and their role in wellbeing and social justice.

Keywords : community psychology, ecological theory, family literacy education, flow on effects, holistic wellbeing

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