

Improving Family Literacy By Increasing Investments in Adult Literacy Education

Moving From a One Life Cycle to a Multiple Life Cycles Education Policy

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November 1, 2007 is National Family Literacy Day in the U.S.

Policymakers sometimes opt to fund early childhood education to "stop illiteracy at the source" at the expense of adult literacy education funding. In Canada in 2006 the new conservative government announced cuts of CAN\$17.7 million in what was already a skimpy federal budget for adult literacy education. The Headline News web page of the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) of October 4, 2006 carried the following statement from a government official (<http://www.nald.ca/index.htm> Oct 4 06):

"The Tories rationalize the cuts by saying they want to focus instead on better teaching children how to read and write, Treasury Board President John Baird said last week. He noted that governments need to more effectively use the \$20 billion they already spend on educating younger Canadians. This is repair work after the fact, Baird said of adult literacy programs. We've got to (have a) much greater focus on ensuring we get it right from the get-go, with the first \$20 billion, rather than doing it after the fact."

This type of thinking has been often used to call for "stopping illiteracy at the source," meaning with young children, at the expense of focusing upon adult literacy education. But this is a mistaken understanding of "the source of illiteracy" and ignores the role of adults as parents of children and the intergenerational transfer of literacy from adults to their children.

The Intergenerational Transfer of Literacy

In 1975, the Human Resources Research Organization published *Reading for Working*, a book I edited which brought together a number of adult literacy projects I had directed and a paper I had written for the U. S. government. In the chapter dealing with the government paper, I reported on the relationships between the reading scores on the 1971 National Assessment of Educational Progress of young adults (17; 25—35 years old) and the educational levels of the adult's parents. Taking notice of the fact that the young adult's reading scores systematically increased as their parent's educational levels increased, I simply reported that adult education might be more important than we thought because it could affect the literacy ability of the adult's children.

Later, in a report entitled "Literacy and Human Resources Development at Work: Investing in the Education of Adults to Improve the Educability of Children" (Sticht, 1983) I argued that a body of research existed to suggest that more highly educated parents transmit literacy intergenerationally via oral language skills and the modeling of literacy skills. Therefore if we could find ways to provide education for adults we might get double value from education dollars because investing in the education of adults could improve the educability of their children. I

have referred to this as getting "double duty dollars" when investing in adult education. We pay for the adults' education, and we get improved education for both the adults and their children.

Intergenerational Transmission of Literacy in the UK

Some years later that I came across an exceptionally well done book aimed at helping adult literacy educators in the United Kingdom. The book was published in 1975 by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to go along with a major adult literacy campaign that the BBC was carrying out. Called the BBC Adult Literacy Handbook, the book was, and in my judgment still is, one of the best introductions to adult literacy students and literacy instruction for tutors, teachers, and others.

Of particular interest to me was the fact that the mere acorn of an idea I had expressed that same year of 1975 in *Reading for Working* about the relationship of parent's education to their children's reading ability, even when the children had grown into young adulthood, was present in the BBC Handbook as a full-grown oak tree sized concept about what I later called the intergenerational transfer of literacy, and more recently a Life Cycles education policy.

Here are some of the seminal ideas as presented in the BBC Handbook in 1975:

"From all the research on reading difficulty in schools, it is not difficult to argue a most forcible case for the importance of certain factors of family background to literacy. The term Cycle of Deprivation is commonly used to describe the legacy of deprivation which passes down from parent to child and cannot be broken by intervention at only one point in the circle. If a child grows up deprived of, and unaccustomed to, books and libraries and opportunities to practise verbal skills, then this will affect his progress and he, in turn, unless intervention is made, will see no pleasure and relevance in reading and will pass this attitude on to his children. Researchers have plotted the crucial importance of parental interest: so much is a confirmation of commonsense observation."

The BBC Handbook presents a very well done graphic which depicts a Multiple Life Cycles education policy and shows how illiteracy or semi-literacy is passed from one generation of semi-literate parents to their children, who then become the semi-literate parents of another generation of illiterates/semi-literates. Yet despite this clear understanding of the intergenerational cycles of illiteracy/semi-literacy documented so well by the BBC Handbook over thirty years ago, today the United Kingdom, like most nations, including the United States, pursues a policy of education focusing on one life cycle, a "cradle to grave" or "lifelong education" policy.

More Recent Research on the Intergenerational Effects of Parents Education Level

Feinstein, Duckworth, & Sabates (2004) from the Center for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning in London reported that "The intergenerational transmission of educational success is a key driver of the persistence of social class differences and a barrier to equality of opportunity ... Parental beliefs, values, aspirations and attitudes (termed here 'cognitions') are very important, as is parental well-being. ... Parenting skills in terms of warmth, discipline and educational behaviours are all major factors in the formation of school success. ... We conclude that the

intergenerational transmission of educational success is a key element in equality of opportunity. There are substantial benefits of education that accrue to individuals and society in terms of what education enables parents to pass on to their children."

The November 2005 REFLECT magazine article by John Bynner and Samantha Parsons, entitled "New light on literacy and numeracy" found that parent's basic skills were related to their children's achievement in literacy and numeracy and stated, "Although much more penetrating analysis will be needed to understand the basis of intergenerational skill transfer, it seems that parent literacy and numeracy is an important part of it, especially in the case of parents whose skills are at the lowest levels."

From Parents to Progeny: Toward a Multiple Life Cycles Education Policy

Given the important intergenerational effects of parent's education level on the achievement of their children, I believe we need to shift our education policies from a focus on one life cycle to a focus on "multiple life cycles" education. Such a policy would explicitly recognize that adults transfer their educational achievements to the achievement of their children, as illustrated so well in the BBC Handbook some thirty years ago. It would also recognize that adult education should be valued as much as is childhood education, and that nations should provide adult education systems on a par with children's education systems. The importance of adult's education for children has been succinctly expressed by the South American educationist, Rosa Maria Torres. She has argued that "the children's right to education should include the right to educated parents."

Poorly educated children are the source of adult functional illiteracy, and functionally illiterate adults are the source of poorly educated children. Perhaps through education based on a Multiple Life Cycles policy, in which children are guaranteed their right to educated parents, the vicious intergenerational cycles of functional illiteracy can be stopped at their sources. It is time to implement Multiple Life Cycles education policies in the UK, US, and other nations. Thirty years is enough time to wait.

NOTE: For additional information see: Toward a Multiple Life Cycles Education Policy: Investing in the Education of Adults to Improve the Educability of Children. This paper argues for education policy that recognizes that literacy is transferred across generations from parents to their children. Therefore, we need to have a much larger investment in the education of youth and adults who are parents or who will be parents. Adult literacy education affects multiple life cycles. An extensive review is presented of research on early childhood education, relationships of parent's education to children's literacy, parenting and preschool effectiveness, and other issues. Online at: <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/sticht/06dec/06dec.pdf>

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