

Can Massive Injections of Adult Literacy Education Improve Children's Reading Skills?

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Data released in 2005 from the National Center for Education Statistics showing 30 years of National Assessment of Educational progress (NAEP) indicate that, from 1971 up to 2004, reading scores for 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds were flat. Indeed, a patient in an intensive care unit whose health-monitoring indicators went as flat as the NAEP data would be declared dead!

Despite past failures to improve reading scores, today, as in the past, tens of billions of dollars are being spent on special programs to raise the literacy skills of children. Meanwhile expenditures for adult literacy education have been and still are trivial.

This goes on despite the fact that for the past 30 years the K-12 system has been graduating millions of young adults below the 20th and 10th percentiles of reading as measured by the NAEP, with no apparent improvement in the proficiency scores for students at these percentile ranks. Furthermore, there is little evidence that this can or will be turned around anytime soon.

It is extraordinary that policies that attempt "fix" children in the institutional settings of preschools or the public schools, and then return them to their debilitating home lives still command such massive amounts of funding, while there is great reluctance to acknowledge and meet the needs of the children's parents for continuing education. This situation prevails despite extensive research suggesting that, through the intergenerational transfer of language and literacy, serious investments in the education of adults could likely improve the educability of their children.

Given the data of the past 30 years, which indicate mostly failure to improve children's learning of language and literacy in the schools and up into adulthood - even those children at the 10th percentile - it seems that some new strategy for improving children's and hence adults' literacy is called for.

There is a grossly underfunded and underdeveloped adult education and literacy system in the United States with over 3,000 programs and close to 3 million enrollees per year. But the federal level of funding is less than US\$225 per enrollee. Even with state contributions added in, the average funding per enrollee across the United States is only about US\$650. This is less than one tenth of what is spent per enrollee on Head Start, which serves mostly the children of these poorly literate adults.

Perhaps now, after 30 years of trying and apparently "flat-lining" in our attempts to raise the reading achievement of children through schemes that largely ignore the literacy education needs of the children's parents, it may be time to acknowledge the existence of the adult education and literacy system and to provide the funding and other resources it needs to produce genuine and extensive improvements in the literacy and lives of adults.

Massive injections of adult literacy education might just be what is needed to resuscitate a reading instruction patient that is presently in a deep coma. And we should do this before the patient goes completely brain-dead.

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