

Literacy Campaigns: Access to Books is the First Step

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Literacy Network News, Spring, 2007, page 7 (Literacy Network of Greater Los Angeles)

The usual approach in literacy campaigns aimed at young people is to urge them to read more. Campaigns feature exhortations from famous people (usually athletes) telling young people that reading is good for you, official days or weeks set aside to honor reading, and prizes that readers can win by taking tests on what they read (one recent campaign features a free ticket to a major wrestling event as the grand prize).

This approach is not only unnecessary, it might be counterproductive.

Young people like to read

It is unnecessary to urge young people to read more and understand the importance of reading because, given the chance, they do in fact read quite a bit, and they certainly do understand the importance of reading. A number of studies confirm that given access to comprehensible and interesting reading material, children and adolescents take advantage of them. More access to reading results in more reading; this result applies to books in the home, classroom libraries, school libraries and public libraries (Krashen, 2004). In fact, sometimes a single, brief exposure to good reading material can result in a clear increase in enthusiasm for reading (Ramos and Krashen, 1998; Cho and Krashen, 2002).

Reluctant readers?

"Reluctant" readers are often those who have little access to books: Worthy and McKool (1996) studied 11 sixth graders who "hated to read." Nine of the 11 had little access to interesting reading material at home or in school, and none had visited the public library during the previous year. The two who had access to interesting reading were the only ones who read "with any degree of regularity" (p. 252). Ironically, even though all were described as "reluctant readers," all appeared to be quite enthusiastic about "light reading" (e.g. comics).

A poll conducted by READ California of young people ages 10 through 17 confirmed that older children and teenagers understand that reading is important: 99% felt that reading skill was "really important" (88%) or "kind of important" (11%) for success in the future (Fairbanks, Maaslin, Maullin and Associates, 1999). Fifty-eight percent of the respondents said they read four days a week or more, and 67% said they read 26 minutes per day or more, a result similar to that reported in other polls (Krashen, 2001).

Rewarding reading

There is no clear evidence that rewarding children for reading works: Studies that claim to show that rewards work do not isolate the effect of rewards from other factors. In the

case of Accelerated Reader, studies compare the effect of Accelerated Reader, which includes rewards, tests, adding more books to the environment, and providing time to read, to business-as-usual. We already know that improving the print environment and providing time to read improves reading. If there is a gain, it is likely that this was the reason why (Krashen, 2003, 2005)

There is also reason to suspect that rewards can have long-term damaging effects. If we provide an extrinsic reward for an activity that is intrinsically pleasant, we are telling children that the activity is not pleasant, that nobody would do it without a bribe (Kohn, 1999). There have been no long-term studies of Accelerated Reader or other reward programs.

The real problem: access to books

Perhaps the most serious problem with current literacy campaigns is that they ignore, and even divert attention from, the real problem: Lack of access to books for children of poverty.

Access and poverty

Research consistently shows that children who live in low-income neighborhoods have little access to reading material in their public libraries, in their schools, and at home. After investigating access to reading material in different neighborhoods, Neuman and Celano (2001) concluded that that " ... children in middle-income neighborhoods were likely to be deluged with a wide variety of reading materials. However, children from poor neighborhoods would have to aggressively and persistently seek them out" (p. 15).

If more access leads to more reading, and if more reading leads to better reading, writing, spelling, grammar, and a larger vocabulary (for overwhelming evidence, see Krashen, 2004), this means that the first step any literacy campaign needs to take is to make sure children have access to plenty of books.

Libraries!

In my opinion, the place to focus is the library, both the school and public library. Studies show a positive relationship between library quality (school and public) and the amount read, as well as a relationship with reading competence. Better libraries mean more literacy development for younger readers as well as for high school students.

We know a great deal about how to encourage reading when books are present. Successful approaches include read-alouds, models (seeing others read), providing some time in school set aside for reading, and, under certain circumstances, direct encouragement (Shin, 2003). But the first step is to provide access to reading, and the clearest way to do this is by improving library holdings and staffing.

Improving library holdings and staffing is a necessary step, and in many cases it will be

sufficient. Urging young people to read more when there is little available to read makes as much sense as urging starving people to eat, when no food is available.

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