Four Educational Myths that Stymie Social Justice

Literacy is both an educational and a social issue, and literacy disadvantage is ultimately an issue of equity, and a matter of social justice. Coherent policies should govern all aspects of schooling, particularly as they affect literacy outcomes. Policies and practices should be based on informed professional judgment and more by prevailing socio-political mores and deeply held beliefs by educators and educational communities. The result is a plethora of practices that persist even though their effectiveness remain unproven. These practices acquire the status of myth and are rarely examined critically.

In an article published this month in The Educational Forum, Joan Beswick, Elizabeth Sloat and Doug Wills analyze four educational myths that they argue have a negative impact on students’ early literacy development, and ultimately on societal aspirations to be more inclusive and equitable. The authors offer informed opinion and research evidence to dispel these myths.

**Myth 1: Literacy learning trajectories are not alterable.**
This myth is based on evidence that children are already oriented toward success or failure at the time of school entry. These children enter school with greater cognitive maturity and higher readiness skills, and are likely to enjoy a far greater level of parental support. These children start out ahead; and the longer they stay in school, the wider the gap becomes with other children.

**Response:** While some children enter school at a greater disadvantage, this does not mean that their fates are sealed. Children’s early years’ experiences should be viewed as one of the determinants of the “range of potential” that children possess when they enter school. Moreover, evidence suggests that literacy learning trajectories are alterable and that children who encounter reading difficulty can be identified in kindergarten or even earlier. Early identification and intervention can prevent most reading difficulties. When children at-risk receive the support necessary to develop literacy skills early in their school career, they close the gap with more advantaged peers.

**Myth 2: Retention is the answer.**
This myth presumes that all children have the ability to master grade-level curricula and all that is required is more time on task.

**Response:** Recent research clearly demonstrates that children who are retained in kindergarten perform less well on measures of both literacy and numeracy than they would have performed had they been promoted to the next grade level with same-age peers. Additionally, early grade retention is a powerful predictor of school disengagement and of later school dropout. Research on early grade retention strongly suggests that retention is an ineffective, expensive, and often counterproductive intervention for children who do not achieve curricular objectives during their first year in grade.

**Myth 3: Early identification stigmatizes students.**
Proponents of this myth argue that providing extra support to boost early literacy learning will unnecessarily stigmatize young children, harm their self-esteem, and reduce their motivation to learn.

**Response:** In reality, children know all too well when their reading skills are weak – they engage in ongoing peer evaluation and in self-evaluation in relation to peers. A preventive early intervention approach is inclusive and non-categorical. No label is assigned, and support is available to all students regardless of the reasons for their reading difficulties. By preventing literacy failure, early intervention ensures that stigmatization does not occur and that students can participate fully in the curricular and social life of school.

**Myth 4: Efforts are futile.**
Proponents of this myth argue that schools cannot reverse developmental delays or undo cases of severe deprivation. Students’ readiness to learn at school and their literacy trajectories are influenced by numerous factors – many of which are beyond the control of schools.

**Response:** Excuses for low expectations perpetuate the status quo and stymie equity. They deny hope to those who need it most. Since the Coleman report (1966), numerous studies have shown that schooling outcomes do vary considerably, even when account is taken of students’ family backgrounds. Therefore, schools, as publicly funded and universally accessible societal institutions, must be ready to address the diverse needs children bring with them to the school setting. This requires parents and educators to adopt a stance that school reform is possible, and that efforts are not futile.

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