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## Taking better care of adults to improve education

From a post by Tom Sticht on the Literacy Information and Communication System Listserve  
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### Education will improve when we get serious about taking better care of adults

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All children are born poor. This is because newborn children cannot own property, they cannot earn money, keep stock portfolios, nor gain and maintain wealth in any manner. So all children, even the children of the rich, are impoverished when they are born. Poverty is the natural condition of babies, infants, and children.

When we say that millions of children are living in poverty, we are recognizing that each child inherits the economic condition of his or her parents. So we are saying that these children have been born to adults (parents) who are living in poverty as defined by the federal government. That is, the children are living in households with incomes below certain defined levels of income. In general, children who are living in poverty are there because their parents are living in poverty.

One of the most enduring statistical findings in the field of educational research is that children's achievement in education is correlated with the level of educational achievement of their parents, especially the educational achievement of their mothers. In 1973, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) presented data for 9, 13, and 17 year olds and for young adults showing that as parents' education increased from no high school, to some high school, graduate of high school, or post-high school, the reading achievement of their children systematically increased. This was true for some eight types of reading tasks: word meanings, visual aids, written directions, reference materials, significant facts, main ideas, inferences, and critical reading.

In the 1980 renorming of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), scores on all four of the subtests which form the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT), made-up of reading and mathematics tests, increased as mother's education increased. This was true for Whites, Hispanics, and African-Americans, though at all levels of mother's education, Whites scored higher than Hispanics who scored higher than African-Americans. Similar findings to the foregoing have been found on the NAEP and other cognitive tests (e.g., the SAT) for over a quarter century.

Although there are obvious beneficial effects of educating undereducated adults, especially women, we presently

focus almost all educational efforts on children or those who have achieved well in the K-12 system and have entered into higher education, while effectively casting-off the parents of the children, leaving the parents unemployed or working in jobs that keep the family in poverty or near-poverty levels of living and keeping the parents uneducated. This is, of course, the primary basis for the next generation of children born poor, bound into living in poverty, and failing to achieve well in our educational system.

Despite the obvious negative consequences of neglecting the plight of adults on the continuous failure of their children in our school system, we continue to discard the parents and other adults who make-up the home communities of the children, and once again bash the schools, the teachers, the administrators and the politicians for failing to educate these children of poorly educated adults.

Writing over a century ago, Edmund Burke Huey (*The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, 1908/1968, MIT Press) recognized the plight of many parents whom he considered might lack knowledge needed to foster language and literacy growth in children and in Chapter XV he wrote: "Where children have good homes, reading will thus be learned independently of school. Where parents have not the time or intelligence to assist in this way the school of the future will have as one of its important duties the instruction of parents in the means of assisting the child's natural learning in the home." (pp. 311-312)

Today, we have chosen to ignore this sage advice about the need to instruct parents "in the means of assisting the child's learning in the home." Instead, we have sought to take the responsibility for parent's "assisting the child's natural learning in the home" by removing children from their homes, and educating them in the schools, starting at birth with Early Head Start and continuing through college. But no matter what we do, the statistics don't budge: parent's education is still one of the best, strongest predictors of how well children will learn and achieve in our educational system. It is the children of poor and uneducated parents who are most likely to become the underachieving, dropouts of our school systems.

Unfortunately, we never seem to take the advice of a century ago, and the statistics of the last quarter century seriously and focus educational efforts on adults. Given our past failures of compensatory education of children by essentially ignoring their parents, perhaps its time to think about supporting early childhood education with early parenthood education. We might just find that by investing in the education of adults we can improve the educability of children.

It seems likely that our nation's children's education will improve only when we get serious about taking better care of adults.