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ABSTRACT

Illiteracy is intergenerational and is correlated with poverty. Especially significant is the effect of the mother's education level on children's academic achievement. A number of recent initiatives are emphasizing the role of parents as reading boosters. However, this approach fuels the debate between those who view literacy as skill development for productivity versus those who see literacy as a means of empowering individuals. A meeting held in San Diego in 1988 highlighted another debate--between researchers who believe that not enough is yet known about strategies that work in remediating intergenerational literacy and practitioners who have had some success in educating parents to educate their children. (Addresses and telephone numbers for nine sources on intergenerational illiteracy issues are listed. Research in the area of parents as reading boosters is described. Brief descriptions of four programs--Parent and Child Education in Kentucky, a Boston storefront program, the Parent-Reader Workshops at New York City Technical College in Brooklyn, and New Chance, a pilot project at six sites--are included. A bar graph depicts the impact of parental reading habits on the frequency of children reading for pleasure.) (CML)

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The Literacy Beat

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MYTH #5:

ILLITERACY CAN BE 'CURED' IN ONE GENERATION

Illiteracy in the United States, with rare exceptions, is intergenerational. When it persists for more than a generation, it usually also means that the family is poor. The major exceptions to this pattern are those with severe learning disabilities or first-generation immigrants who do not speak English. For all others, the family is where illiteracy begins and often is perpetuated.

In the past, schooling was considered the mitigating factor in intergenerational illiteracy, improving each generation's chances for becoming more stable and productive by increasing the literacy of the children.

It doesn't seem to work that way anymore. Or, at least, schooling is not breaking the illiteracy chain with as much of the population as American society needs, both economically and socially.

Some oft-repeated concerns:

* Family poverty is rising. In families headed by a person younger than 25, the poverty rate has doubled since 1973 (30 percent in 1985). Nearly one-half of children from these young families in 1985 were poor; or, to look at it another way, one-fourth of the 1988 first-graders are living in poverty.

* Teenagers living in poverty are four times as likely to have poor basic academic skills as teenagers with income levels above the poverty line.

* In 1982-83, families in which neither parent was a high school graduate included 39 percent of the children living in poverty; only 7 percent of the poor children came from families where both parents were high school graduates.

An especially significant factor in illiteracy--and poverty--is the education level of the mother. To begin with, teenagers with poor basic skills are five times as likely to give birth before the age of 16 as teens with academic skills that are average or above. Every day, teenagers give birth to 1,300 babies; of this number, 800 of the mothers have not completed high school, 100 have not completed ninth grade.

The Guttmacher Institute and other groups report that one of the major results of early motherhood is an end to further education for the mother. Only one-half of the teenagers who become parents before the age of 18 will have graduated from high school by their mid-twenties. A girl who becomes a mother before the age of 20 will have one-half the lifetime earnings of those who delay having children until after 20.

A statistic which ties all of these various facts into one big problem comes from the "Profile of American Youth," commissioned by the Department of Defense. Analyzing a battery of tests given in 1980 to 12,000 young people ages 16-23 selected as representative of that population, the study found that the mother's education level was the most important variable affecting the academic achievement of her children. It has more effect than a combination of all other variables studied. These included the father's education, the average income of the family and the father's occupational

Coming Next Month ...

Schools' Role in Intergenerational Literacy

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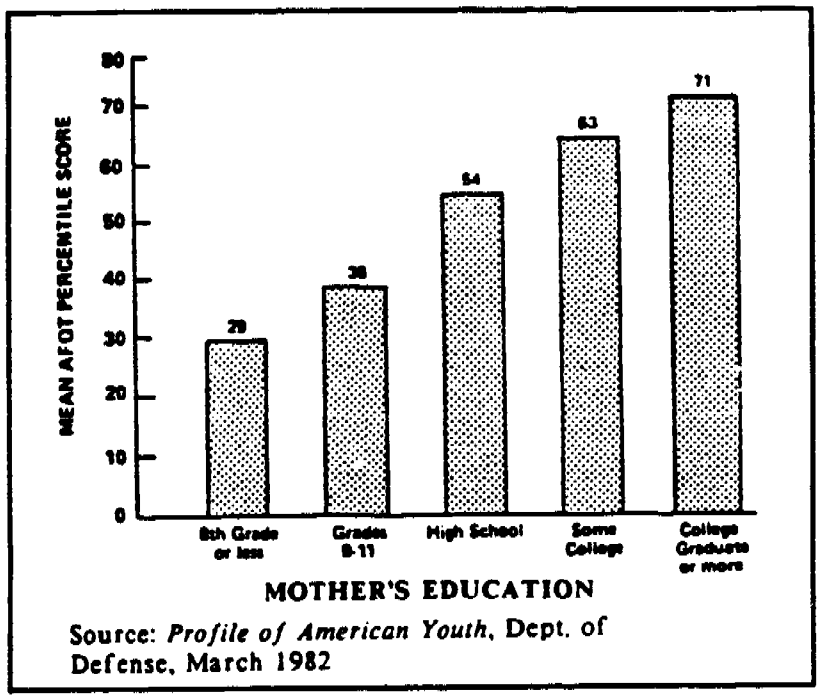
status. Because of the compelling influence of the mother's education, the study used it in place of a social-economic index as a general indicator of family background (see chart).



Source: *Profile of American Youth*, Dept. of Defense, March 1982

Parents in the Spotlight

Because of the intergenerational links affecting illiteracy--and a growing number of poor, less educated parents--the national rhetoric now is focusing on "family policy," "parents as educators," or "good parenting."

Says the U.S. Department of Education in its summary of research, "What Works": "The best way for parents to help their children to become better readers is to read to them." Its more recent publication, "Becoming a Nation of Readers: What Parents Can Do," contends that learning to read begins at home.

Congress put this view into policy when it approved this spring the Even Start legislation as part of the omnibus education bill. Even Start authorizes funds for programs that teach parents along with children. In several other programs, Congress mandated greater parent involvement in education, especially its largest pre-collegiate program, Chapter I, which provides supplemental support for disadvantaged students. The new amendments reinstate parent advisory councils for Chapter I programs--a provision dropped in revisions in 1981.

While no one argues against the good intentions behind such efforts, many experts in literacy believe they are too simplistic. Such messages may not reach those who need to hear them the most--parents with such poor reading skills that they can't take the advice, and/or parents so unskilled they cannot comfortably accept what they consider to be "middleclass values." Or, what young black students in some urban schools describe as being "whitey."

The rhetoric/policies and the viewpoints of literacy experts represent a classic debate in the literacy community--between those who view literacy as skills development for productivity purposes and those who see literacy as a means of empowering individuals.

It is just one of several debates revolving around intergenerational issues.

Researchers Versus Practitioners

Another debate is over how much is known about strategies that can intervene successfully in intergenerational illiteracy. And how important it is to have reliable data.

The research community largely contends that the verdict still is out on if and what programs work in educating parents who are illiterate and preventing illiteracy among their children. Those who run the programs, the practitioners, contend that enough is known to say some things work.

A meeting between experts from both camps, held in San Diego in April, underscored the disagreements. The meeting, on "The Intergenerational Transfer of Cognitive Skills," was called by Tom Sticht, head of Applied Behaviorial and Cognitive Sciences, Inc., and a researcher on literacy, with support from the MacArthur Foundation.

There is very little in research literature about the value of educating parents to educate their children, said Steve Reder of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Diana Scott-Jones, an educational psychologist from the University of Illinois, added that studies have shown that full family participation in reading activities produces positive results, but there is little supporting evidence that these approaches are more effective than other methods. Other researchers argued that Head Start, the major federal program for preschool children, has not fully proven itself since it began 20 years ago--but also that 20 years was not long enough to produce reliable research data.

Another participant, Warren Simmons of American University, explained why researchers take a cautious position about claims of success by practitioners. Researchers are interested in long-term studies based on evidence and accepted theories, he said. Their goals don't line up with those of policymakers and practitioners. Policymakers, especially legislators, are more interested in instant results than in long-term evaluations.

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REPORTING ABOUT INTERGENERATIONAL ILLITERACY ISSUES

* Trace intergenerational illiteracy in a family. For example, Leon Dash, when he was gathering data on families for his series in the *Washington Post* on unwed teenage mothers found the pattern began for some families in the sharecropping culture of the rural South. He traced the pattern back for several generations and is using his work for a book on intergenerational ties between the rural South and urban poverty.

* Adapt Clark's research on successful and unsuccessful students in terms of parental support for learning, even though socio-economic factors may be the same. Find and profile families with different attitudes about education.

* Build articles around adults who are enrolled in literacy classes specifically because they want to help their children.

* Clark's research frequently found that families with low-achieving children felt helpless, had lost their sense of hope and didn't value their participation in helping their children learn. What community supports exist to counteract hopelessness on the part of parents who are illiterate? How do families "connect" to services that will help them? What are the barriers, e.g., lack of transportation, information?

SOURCES ON INTERGENERATIONAL ILLITERACY ISSUES

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(Family influences on learning to read)

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(Longitudinal research on children's literacy issues)

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University of Illinois
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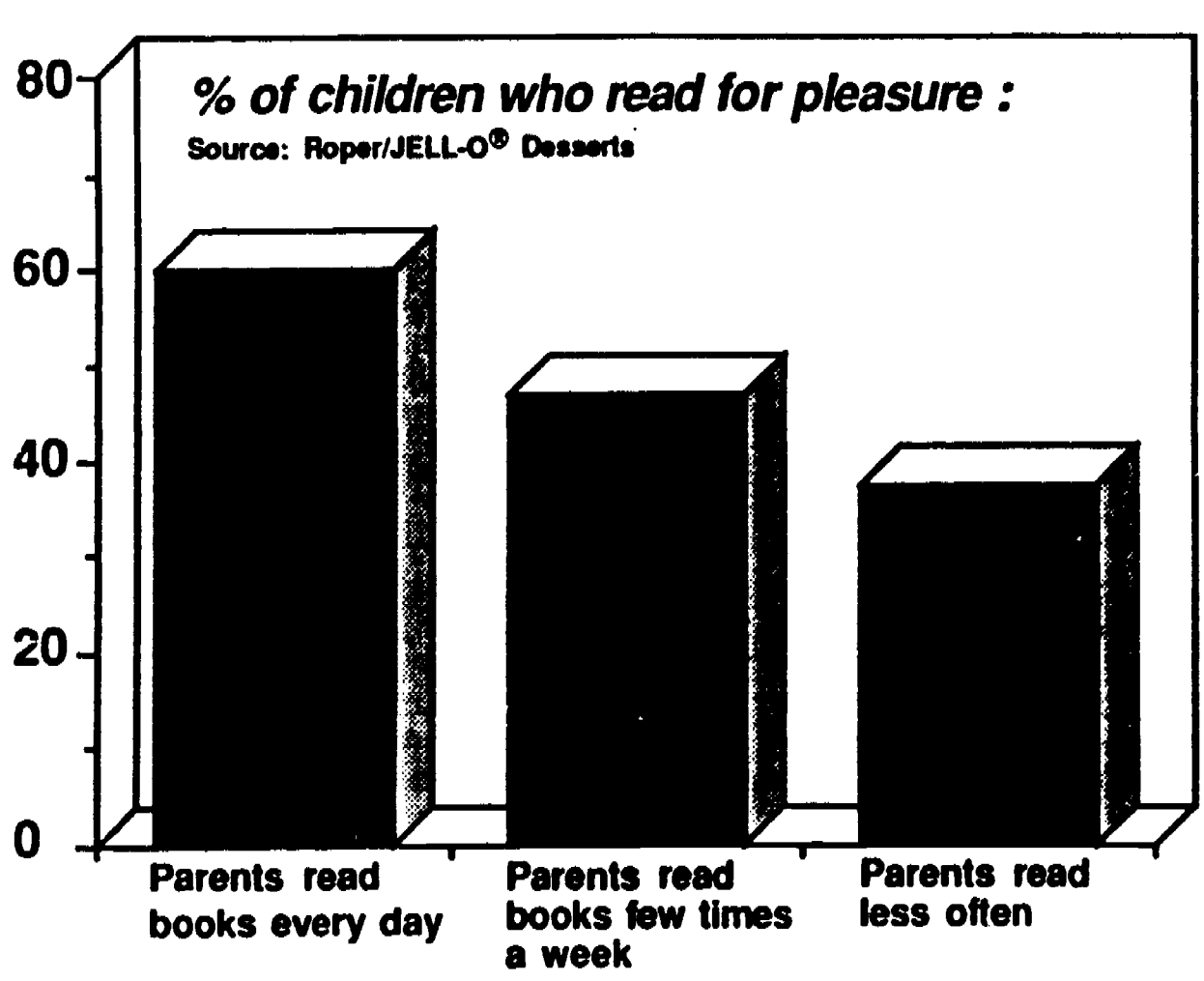
(Family and community interventions)

PARENTS ARE READING BOOSTERS

Additional evidence about the effect of parents' reading habits on children's literacy comes from a recent survey by the Roper Organization, commissioned by Jell-O Desserts in cooperation with Reading Is Fundamental, Inc. Parents almost unanimously (97%) said reading was very important, and 72% said it primarily is the parents' responsibility to help children develop an interest in reading. Only 9% said it was strictly up to the schools. Parents of children with a strong interest in reading were more likely to read with them daily (64%) than parents of children who were somewhat (41%) or not (31%) interested in reading. Sixty percent of the parents who read books daily are more likely to have children who read for pleasure every day than parents who read less than a few times a week (37%). Parents with the least education had the most desire for helpful reading materials--73% of parents with only a high school diploma, compared to 43% of those with a college degree.

Impact Of Parental Reading Habits On Frequency Of Children Reading For Pleasure



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Jeanne Heberle, who works with the Parent Child Education program in Kentucky, said practitioners don't disagree with the research viewpoint, but they believe researchers ignore the human side of program successes. "They should study existing programs and figure out why they are either succeeding or failing, instead of devising new projects that impose constraints on the programs," she said.

The conference agreed that, thus far, no programs seeking to solve intergenerational problems have produced the overwhelming results they promised (including Head Start), but there have been small wins along the way. Parents can't learn to read overnight. And they will never learn to read if funding for programs is erratic. Policymakers, they said, have to begin to value the small wins.

The practitioners pointed up another problem--competing programs in the adult literacy field. For example, Sandra Fox of ORBIS, an educational consulting firm, said the American Indian communities she has worked with in the Dakotas "have been slapped with more quick-fix approaches to education than they care to deal with." The result, she said, is competition among the groups supporting the programs, such as Head Start and bilingual education, rather than a cooperative effort to educate the community. Others said parents don't want to be "guinea pigs" in experiments for researchers.

Parents as Deficits

Another debate focuses on the ability of families with low literacy skills to help educate their children.

Don Davies, professor of education at Boston University and head of the Institute for Responsive Education, believes many educators have a stereotyped view of "good families" and proper childrearing. Children from families who deviate from that view are assumed to be "at-risk" or behavior problems. They also think of low income/low status families as being "deficient," rarely talking about the strengths of poor families and neighborhoods.

Davies views come from his three-nation study of how schools treat poor parents--in the United States, England and Portugal. However, the "deficit" perspective of families is found in a lot of social research reported in recent years.

A different view is taken by researcher Reginald Clark in an article in the 1987 fall issue of *Equity and Choice*. He studied family characteristics of low-income minority students who were graduating from high school in Chicago and whose parents had low literacy at the time the students were in the elementary grades.

Clark divided the families on the basis of high-achieving and low-achieving seniors, finding different family environments for each group.

Parents of high-achievers, for example, were involved and interested in their children's home activities; monitored their use of time and space; created family ritual around studying, sharing information and problem solving; took time to explain and demonstrate everyday life events; held consistent standards for behavior; praised children regularly; and developed etiquette toward house rules.

Families of low-achieving students, on the other hand, had limited involvement in the children's home activities, inconsistent knowledge of the child's activities, infrequent learning activities with the child, inconsistent or non-existent standards, and frequently criticized the child and exhibited disagreement over adhering to parental authority.

Mothers of high-achievers had great self-esteem and sense of direction, a strong hope that things would get better and greater belief in the importance of networking with kin or friends. Parents of low achievers conveyed a sense of hopelessness.

Parents of high achievers were willing to sacrifice for their children's education, but also believed childrens' responsibilities were to work hard and take schooling seriously. Parents of high achievers used everyday activities to teach. In the homes of low-achievers, "television watching, goofing off, and discordant parent-child dialogues were dominant activities."

Clark's general point is that families in the same neighborhood can be organized very differently, in ways not determined by race or class and not dependent on strong literacy skills of parents. His research would seem to support the empowerment argument for literacy.

A related point was made by Janine Bempechat of Harvard University at the San Diego conference. Evidence suggests, she said, that motivational factors are greater determinants of performance in school than measures of intelligence. "Maladaptive" factors would be lack of persistence, a preference for easy over challenging tasks, a propensity to fall apart at the first hint of difficulty and low expectations for success.

"Parents' own beliefs, values, attributions and attitudes serve as motivators, organizers and guides for their behavior with their children," she said. And these influence the development of behaviors and achievement of their children.

For example, mothers of girls attribute success in math to effort and failure to lack of ability. Mothers of boys, on the other hand, attribute success in math to ability and failure to lack of effort. It is not surprising, Bempechat said, that girls have lower self-concepts about their math ability.

This emphasis on motivation is the basis of a set of "mega-skills" which Dorothy Rich of the Home and School Institute uses with parents (to be published in a book this fall). Stressing "the family as educator," Rich's materials are used to develop skills and attitudes which motivate children to enjoy learning, such as responsibility, effort, confidence and perseverance. The institute is working with the memberships of several national organizations, such as postal workers and the Red Cross, to encourage them and parents in their communities to assume more responsibility for developing the "mega-skills." The three-year project is funded by the MacArthur Foundation.

Others with significant research data on intergenerational issues are Jeanne Chall and Catherine Snow of Harvard University. They note, for example, that low-income children can function well in learning to read in the primary grades. It is when reading is used for gathering information and elaboration, tasks which Clark's successful families aided, that children hit a "slump." This usually occurs about the fourth grade.

Programs That Seem to be Small "Wins"

* Parent and Child Education, operating less than two years in Kentucky, enrolls parents without a high school diploma who attend school three days a week with their preschool-age children. While the children are in their own program, the parents study basic skills and parenting, then observe and work with their own children. During the first year, more than 70 percent of the parents in the program earned a high school equivalency certificate or raised their academic skills by two grade levels. PACE has a grant from the Kenan Charitable Trust to expand the program in the Southeast.

* In Boston, a storefront site offers parents the opportunity to improve their reading skills in a family setting. Parents attend two to three hours each week, working with volunteer tutors. The center has a lending library and computers for learning and play. Families can attend literacy socials every other Saturday at which storytellers entertain both children and parents.

* The Parent-Reader Workshops at New York City Technical College in Brooklyn teach remedial-level parents how to read to their children. Each workshop focuses on a different subject area, such as poetry or science. Parents share responses of their children to their reading.

* New Chance, a pilot project at six sites, integrates a mix of services for young mothers--education, life management, employment development, health, family planning and family education. The programs seem to work better than others in retaining participants and reducing further pregnancies. The project is moving to a demonstration phase, to be supported at 15 to 20 sites in 6-9 states through 1995.

Stand and Deliver, The Seminar

Coming August 11 to Baltimore, Md. - EWA's one-day seminar on math literacy and the needs of the workplace. Held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Education Commission of the States, the seminar features Governor Rudy Perpich of Minnesota (invited) and Elizabeth Stage of the Lawrence Hall of Science. For more information, contact Anne Lewis or Lisa Walker at EWA, (202) 429-9680.

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