The famous 'word gap' doesn't hurt only the young. It affects many educators, too. [1]

Author: Strauss, Valerie
Source: The Washington Post
Format: Article
Publication Date: 16 Feb 2015

AVAILABILITY
Read Online [2]

EXCERPTS

You have probably heard about what is called the "word gap" found in many low-income children, who were found in a famous 1995 research study to be exposed to 30 million fewer words than their more fortunate peers by age 3, and that this deficit affects literacy development. The word gap has been cited by many experts as a key reason that at-risk children need focused literacy instruction. In this post, Elizabeth A. Gilbert explains that there is a related problem: Many early childhood educators have the same problem. Gilbert is the coordinator of the "Learn at Work Early Childhood Educator Program Labor" in the Labor Management Workplace Education Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

By Elizabeth Gilbert

The term "word gap" was first coined in the 1995 Hart/Risley study that found low-income children are exposed to 30 million fewer words than their higher-income peers before age 3. This study and others have linked poor early literacy skills to lifelong academic, social and income disparities. Word gap initiatives primarily target low-income parents to help them understand the effect they have on their children's cognitive development. Unfortunately, this misses another important part of the problem.

While parents play a vital role in early literacy skills, so do early childhood educators (day-care teachers and child-care providers). Millions of children today spend a great deal of time in early education (child-care) settings. Low-income children can spend more hours a week in child care than in quality time with their parents.
It will come as a surprise to Americans to learn that as many as 1 millionstate-licensed and nationally credentialed early childhood educators are at-risk for functional illiteracy; their reading and writing skills are inadequate to manage daily living and employment tasks that require reading skills beyond a basic level.

Over the the past five years, my colleagues and I at the University of Massachusetts Amherst designed and implemented a workplace education model that measures the base-line adult literacy competence (in reading, writing, math and computer skills) of state-licensed non-college early childhood educators. Test scores are used to appropriately place early childhood educators in ABE/ESOL (Adult Basic Education and English Speakers of Other Languages) contextualized higher learning courses that are geared to better prepare them to meet state standards and to move them toward college entrance.

There are approximately 10,000 early childhood educators in Massachusetts who would benefit from base-line literacy testing; these early childhood educators have not enrolled in college programs. We have tested 120, the majority scoring at fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade equivalence in all areas. Eighty-five percent knew little about computers (all have smartphones). Most had no e-mail address, had never done an Internet search or used Microsoft Word.

To further assess their skill levels and interest in the field, we asked the educators to complete a career survey. Even we were surprised to learn that 97 percent had little or no interest in early education and 98 percent had little knowledge or skill needed for the job. (After the completion of the coursework and re-administering the same career survey, early childhood educator interest and skills levels increased considerably.) To add to the mix, most educators had no idea how little they knew or why their low literacy test scores mattered.

Massachusetts is not alone in the hiring and licensing functionally illiterate early childhood educators. Most states require extremely low levels of education for early childhood teacher licensing. No state in the nation measures or ensures the basic adult literacy competence of non-college early childhood educators. In 32 of 50 states, a half-million non-college early childhood educators are licensed as lead teachers and hold a high school diploma or less. To put this in perspective, a high school diploma in no way ensures adult literacy competence, even at tenth-grade competence. In 2014, 31 percent of American high school graduates met "no" college readiness benchmarks in English, reading, writing, math and science on the ACT.

Why do states license low-literacy early childhood educators? The main reason is money. States pay early childhood educators without degrees near-poverty wages. Who else could or would work for so little? Certainly teachers without degrees whose literacy competence must be proven through rigorous state testing before being able to work as public preschool teachers. With millions of children needing

care, there are few options to serve them if there is no money to pay for more educated staff members.

The story doesn't end here. The only national early education professional development credentialing body in the country, the Center for Professional Recognition, requires no testing or verification of adult literacy competence for any educator it credentials. There are 300,000 or more practicing non-college early childhood educators with a Child Development Associate certificate today. Many will never step into a college classroom, because of their functionally illiteracy.

Americans remain in the dark about this workforce because it is invisible. Like other low-wage workers, there's no time or money to politicize their struggles. The irony and tragedy here is that this low-wage work is intricately tied to how well our children are being educated. The lives of these low-wage workers mirror those of disadvantaged children. Both face the ravages of poverty, lack education, suffer from greater depression and poorer health outcomes and have no power to change of any of it. Low-literacy early childhood educators struggle with their own word gaps - and for the same reasons low-income children do. They have lived with (and in spite of) academic, social and income disparities for decades.

We cut off our noses to spite our faces by ignoring this crisis. Low-literacy early childhood educators and children in their care share misfortunes that perpetuate what I call a mirroring of disadvantage. Each reflects to the other the persistent, durable and complex adversities thrust upon them. Such adversities have consequences outside in the world and inside the classroom, the place they meet for sustenance.

Academics, policy makers, philanthropists and legislators take note. There are no national studies that look at whether states, by not mandating literacy testing for the least educated early childhood educators, are contributing to the nation's abysmal kindergarten and third-grade reading scores. We know the most dramatic progress in linguistic gains is made between zero to five years, the years spent in early education. We also know that 37 percent of children starting kindergarten lack the literacy competence needed for optimum cognitive development. The fact that any proportion of this 37 percent come from early education settings staffed by functionally illiterate early childhood educators should
make us pause.

Next steps

The idea of testing early childhood educators for literacy competence is not to punish or penalize them. The idea is to develop them. This is a multi-faceted problem that demands multi-partner solutions. For this reason, state and federal departments of early education, higher education and workforce development should work together to create and implement policies and practices to develop this workforce. Determining the vocabulary, reading, writing, math and computer competencies of these workers is an objective way to evaluate who needs help, what kind of help is needed and how best to make that happen. Because adult literacy competence is the ground from which all early childhood educators gain the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and practice early care and education standards, literacy test scores are a rational tool to move those who need help forward professionally and academically.

Why now? In the next decade the low-literacy early childhood educator is not going anywhere. While the call for universal pre-kindergarten has been made loud and clear by President Obama, the facts on the ground tell otherwise. There are not a million teachers with degrees waiting in the wings to replace today's less educated low-wage early childhood educators. Without upgrading practical higher education strategies for low-literacy early childhood educators, employers will be hard pressed to keep pace with tougher federal and state early education standards. High turnover, low productivity and poor job performance will cost employers dearly.

With 49 of 50 states implementing Quality Rating Improvement systems (QRIS) a functionally illiterate workforce will slow, if not prevent, them from meeting requisite quality standards. It's no secret that effective professional development for early childhood educators has long been lacking. Critics point to its historically high price tag, its short-sightedness, its inconsistent nature and its inability to meet the needs of non-traditional learners (a majority of early childhood educators).

Adult literacy testing, on the other hand, is cost-free and convenient to take (online), and test scores are immediate, easy to assess and can readily be integrated into current professional development standards. Early childhood educator literacy test scores are integral to creating effective professional development strategies for those who need support. Contextualized learning will allow a large American workforce contingency to keep their jobs while they develop their literacy proficiency. Greater literacy proficiency will better prepare low-literacy early childhood educators to teach young children and will move them closer to college entrance.

If we're serious about closing the word gap for low-income children, we must also be serious about closing the word gap for functionally illiterate early childhood educators. By implementing professional development strategies that use adult literacy testing to assess and then develop low-literacy early childhood educators, we will not only help to transform the "juxtaposed inequalities" of these educators and the children in their care, we also will help to close the achievement and opportunity gaps of both.

Does it get any better than that?
Related link: The talking cure [3]
Region: United States [4]
Tags: quality [5]
child development [6]
outcomes [7]

---

doesn%E2%80%99t-hurt-only-young-it-affects-many-educators

Links

[1] https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/02/famous-%E2%80%98word-gap%E2%80%99-doesn%E2%80%99t-hurt-only-young-it-affects-many-educators [2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2015/02/16/the-famous-word-gap-doesnt-hurt-only-the-young-it-affects-many-educators-too/ [3] https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/15/02/talking-cure [4] https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865 [5] https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality [6] https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-development [7] https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/outcomes