

International Literacy Day: An Actionable Agenda for the Reading and Literacy Center
at Illinois State University

by
Jeffrey Miner with Stefanie Lee Berardi

In recognition of both policies and issues in the teaching of literacy and in honor of the 40th anniversary of International Literacy Day, the inaugural Policy Forum on Literacy Teaching and Learning was held on September 8th, 2006 at the Bone Student Center on the campus of Illinois State University. Celebrated annually, International Literacy Day calls attention to the global efforts to improve awareness and education to promote literacy. This profoundly informative event explored methods of teaching literacy and ways in which such methods can be implemented throughout the lifespan of literacy learners.

Groups represented at the event included Illinois State University, Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois State Library, Illinois Reading Council, Illinois Community College Board, DeWitt-Livingston-McLean Regional Office of Education, Illinois Secretary of State, Office of the Governor, and representatives from public and private Illinois universities, community colleges, school systems, adult literacy programs, and independent literacy consultants. Four key speakers, representing the general perspectives of the literacy community, provided a framework for the event and commemoration of the ideals of International Literacy Day; Representative Dan Brady, Professor Norm Stahl of Northern Illinois University, retired local educator Linda Z. Chizmar, and McLean County Adult Education Director Joyce Fritsch provided insights into legislative policy, higher education, K-12 education, and adult literacy, respectively.

State Representative Dan Brady noted that the effort to promote literacy will require focus by policymakers to improve education through enhanced teacher education at the postsecondary level, increased professional development programs at all levels of education, and parental involvement in the education system. Speaking in support of a cooperative and systemic effort, Brady says that there is no single person who acts as an “encyclopedia of information on literacy.” He encourages teachers and advocates need to keep politicians informed about what is required to enact change. Yet, whilst he presents these goals as the current focus of the government in education, it is admitted that such goals are quixotic without the informed cooperative effort. This stance is developed in the idea held by political officials that students are “tomorrow’s promise.” Brady’s interpretative suggestion is that the government recognizes the current funding challenges for higher education, a system which trains teachers who, in turn, teach students. Effectively, this indicates that such funding would benefit all areas of education and is insufficient without efforts to improve awareness in Springfield.

Representing views from the perspective of higher education, Norm Stahl purported that gaps in literacy research exist. He reflects that, with the exception of those in special education, the need remains for quantitative research. Stahl reflects that, since the 1990’s, the government has been “asking for numbers--[saying] prove to us what you’re doing works. We did not do this in the literacy field. We were so heavily involved in the qualitative revolution that you couldn’t find anybody to crunch the numbers that they asked for--we are suffering today because of that.” Instead of repeating past mistakes, though, Stahl believes that current problems can begin to resolve by offering legislators information relevant to current practices that provide straight-forward data, conclusions, and advice on what course of action would most benefit the teaching of literacy. Furthering complications with collaboration between literacy advocates and policymakers is, as announced by President Bush in a January 2006 State of the Union Address,

the focus on STEM, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, in the future of education at both K-12 and postsecondary levels. Granted that there are different forms of literacy in every area of education, respectively, without everyone proficient in, at the least, reading and writing under the subject of English, the possibility for further literacy proficiency in STEM subjects is lessened.

Brady and Stahl describe the juxtaposition of policy, legislation, research, and innovation as they are contextualized and conceptualized by both the legislative and higher education community. In light of the suggested changes introduced by Brady and Stahl, two additional perspectives contributed to the forum by introducing the constraints of their application with literacy learners in K-12 and adult education programs.

The first of these perspectives is that of Linda Chizmar, a retired curriculum and professional development director for K-12 language arts in the Unit 5 school district, who believes that it is not only the lack of collaboration between literacy advocates and politicians making the teaching of literacy difficult, but, specifically, that the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act is one of the core problems. Under the stress of gaining federal funding, her experiences suggest that K-12 teachers in English education practice their discipline with ignorance to best practices, resulting in current inefficient or ineffective methodologies in teaching literacy. When considering that part of International Literacy Day is recognizing the necessity to be non-exclusive in the teaching of literacy, her experiences have been to the contrary. NCLB, premised as a non-exclusive policy, continues a detrimental exclusion of some of the most vulnerable student populations, such as English language learners and students in low-income schools. Compounding an almost certain difficult pathway to becoming literate in English, English language learners are required to take the most formal tests out of all groups of students. Students in low-income schools have similar difficulties since funding gained from the NCLB is diluted into programs that are less effective than alternatives and mar the reflection of best practices for teaching literacy. Indeed, it appears that the NCLB is leaving some children behind or, at least, making their journey towards literacy more difficult and this is not acceptable or excusable.

Unacceptable and inexcusable practices are not limited only to the teaching of children, noted Joyce Fritsch of the Regional Office of Education for DeWitt, Livingston, and McLean counties, adult literacy is being overlooked, as well. Not unlike other problems with teaching literacy, problems in training adults to become literate have been compounded because of the difficulty in measuring the degree of literacy adults need to achieve to be functional in society, coupled with the tendency of adults to shroud their lack of literacy due to shame or embarrassment. This is an apparent conundrum, as ignorance and carelessness stem from the inability to answer questions of degree, whilst the questions of degree are difficult to answer when ignorance and carelessness are present. The degree to which the conundrum itself exists, though, is lessened by the fact that a mother's education is the determining factor of a child's educational success and, also, that all, not limited to a mother or father, illiterate adults serve as poor models in promoting the literacy of children.

Degree, however, is a negligible factor when determining the extent of the issues surrounding current applications of teaching literacy to K-12 students and adult learners since, even though the aforementioned issues are specific to the experiences of Chizmar and Fritsch, it is certain that identical or similar issues residing in the experiences of Chizmar and Fritsch are present in the experiences of many educators throughout the state of Illinois. With this prevalence in mind, it is hoped that the collaboration between politicians and advocates sought

by Brady and Stahl is realized in order to diminish the problems with current applications of teaching literacy on a widespread scale.

This hope was a resonating presence in the speakers' voices indicating that September 8th is the day for recognition, disposition, and, perhaps, a bit of humility in the denunciation of policies and issues which have been discovered to be refracted hindsight. Such policies and issues were falsely positioned in the forefront, displacing, conceptually and realistically, issues of importance in literacy and preempting these discussions. Holding the Policy Forum on Literacy Teaching and Learning on this day, this September 8th, this International Literacy Day, was not an effort toward change; it was an effort toward awareness—the remaining 364 days of the year are for action.

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