

Letter to the Editors

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I would like to comment on two of the Critical Issues from the *Journal of Literacy Research*, Volume 28, Number 2. In David Pearson's (1996) article, one of his major points is, "Although we do have serious literacy needs, much of the current literacy crisis is manufactured" (p. 302). I would like to amplify this with a true story.

Once upon a time, I worked part-time for a former Sunday Editor of a major New York City newspaper. It so happened that one week there was no big news to put on the front page; there were no wars, hurricanes, kidnappings, elections, etc. As the editorial board was sitting around wondering what to put on the front page, one of them suggested that we start a "crime wave."

"How can we do that?" one editor asked.

"Easy," said the suggester. "We just start reporting all the murders that occur."

It seems that New York City and its immediate environs average about 15 murders a day. So to start a "crime wave," all that needs to be done is to start reporting and picturing the murders as they occur. Add a couple of hard-hitting editorials, find a few scapegoats like the Mayor, the Chief of Police, the welfare system, or family values, and voilà – the crisis exists.

I am suggesting that the current, or sometimes perennial, "reading crisis" is something like the New York City "crime wave." All we have to do to create a "reading crisis" is to start reporting test scores, or more emotionally poignant, some carefully selected case histories. All researchers know that reading ability, like most other abilities, follows a normal distribution curve. If you want a "reading crisis," simply report on the bottom decile test scores. Maybe we could really get some mileage by reporting that half the children are below average. And because schools tend to follow a normal distribution curve too, you can report scores from just the bottom decile of elementary schools. Politicians tend to do this with disarming frequency.

Pearson (1996) tells the truth when he states:

the literacy crisis, like most other educational crises, is manufactured to benefit particular interests – often to support those with an ax to grind, a product to sell, or a partisan view to champion. It is simply not the case that this generation of students reads, writes, punctuates, or performs any other literacy task less well than previous generations. (p. 302)

Being a person with an interest in literacy improvement, I rather like it when the President of the United States wants to emphasize reading instruction with a reading challenge to get all third graders up to the basic reading level of the 40th percentile of fourth graders (one definition of being “able to read”). But if he ever asked me, I would have to say, “Bill, even the President of the United States can’t do away with the normal distribution curve. Perhaps you remember the millions spent on the Right To Read program just a few years ago. But we will accept the money anyway and try our darnedest to move all children ahead just a notch further.”

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The second Critical Issue I would like to discuss is Sharon Quint’s (1996) commentary on the reading achievement of homeless children. Her case-study stories are very emotionally compelling. They remind us once again of the extreme importance of family and community background and their effect on reading achievement. This is a fact attested to not just by pertinent case studies, but by large-scale assessment procedures like the NAPE or by carefully examining the reading achievement scores from any large population.

But what I would like to bring to this discussion is a point seldom seen in literacy, or education, failure articles like Sharon Quint’s – probably because it is too politically sensitive. The point I would like to bring up is that far too many of these failure horror stories are about “unwanted children.” Look at the statistics about children born out of wedlock, often with father unknown. Look at the age statistics on unwed mothers in their early teens who can’t possibly have a high school diploma. These poor newborn children come into the world with one hand tied behind them. It is not the kids’ faults; it is our fault, my fault, and your fault.

Expensive remediation and stellar teachers could help alleviate the literacy problem, but there is not that much money available for expensive remediation. And there are not enough star teachers to meet the avalanche of illiterate, unwanted children who grow up in an illiterate or semi-literate household and perhaps have a gang as a father substitute.

Now, I don’t purport to be a sociologist or a medical expert, but I do believe that as concerned reading professionals we should not be afraid to mention birth control in some of our articles. I don’t care if you espouse phonics or the literature approach, trying to teach reading to the fourth son of a 19-year-old, unemployed, semi-literate, single mother is, on the average, going to be a difficult task with a high risk of failure.

Sharon Quint knows the problem well and specifically mentions, “Single mothers, isolated from extended family or close friends, attempting to deal with poor healthcare, hunger, depression, and possible or actual homelessness” (p. 317). And in all fairness, she does suggest, “networking with a local social-service agency can provide the school with a cadre of social workers or case managers who then have the opportunity to coordinate such services as family counseling,

health, housing, public welfare, and employment training” (p. 318). I agree that these are important remedial measures, but I would urge her, and all of us reading professionals, to be a little more proactive and support measures that help us to have less unwanted children in our classrooms in the first place.

I spend a fair amount of time in New Mexico, and I know of one largely Hispanic community that instituted a program of dispensing contraceptives in the high school. It cut the number of pregnancy dropouts nearly in half in one year. Our federal government has no hesitation in shipping death-control devices, like penicillin or wheat, to third-world countries, which increase population, but it severely restricts birth-control device export. The result you can see in any large school district, or here in California in even our smallest towns where immigrants, legal and illegal, are flooding our schools. As citizens, we can tell our elected legislators, “Hey, we are part of the world.” Excessive population growth is not just Mexico’s problem or Africa’s problem or Asia’s problem, it is our problem. And yes, it is part of the “reading problem.”

References

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