

CONFUSED ABOUT...

ILLINOIS LITERACY POLICY?

Another edition of Stand for Children's "Confused About..." blog series



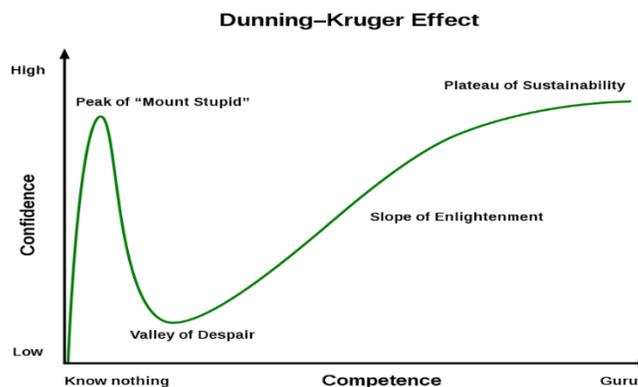
Jessica Handy,
Policy Director

Read this online at: bit.ly/ConfusedAboutIllinoisLiteracyPolicy

05/24/2022

Me too. Let me walk you through my journey to better understand this complicated topic, featuring a heavy dose of honesty, the Dunning-Kruger Effect, and a debt of gratitude to the many kind souls I've met along the ride who pour their hearts into literacy work every day.

This is the Dunning-Kruger Effect:



Early in my professional life, when I was a legislative staffer diving into lots of topics that were new to me, I remember having a revelation that the more I learned about a subject, the more I realized how much I still didn't know. Over a decade later, I discovered that this phenomenon has a name: the Dunning-Kruger Effect! My journey to learn about literacy instruction is following this trajectory, from knowing nothing to progressing along the "slope of enlightenment."

But let's go back in time about two years. Lots of states have undertaken literacy policy work, but Illinois hasn't made any big, splashy literacy reforms. Our literacy rates, like literacy rates nationally, are frighteningly low. (One-third of fourth graders don't meet "basic" reading standards.) "Someone should do something about that," I thought. But I'm not a practitioner and this is so deeply embedded in pedagogy. It was around this time that a friend of a friend

connected me to a local teacher who was having similar thoughts from the opposite direction (i.e., “I know the practice, but I don’t know policy and advocacy.” Here she is, talking about reading instruction in a [TedX Talk](#).)

There is clearly a problem here:

1. **One-third of fourth graders don’t meet “basic” reading standards.** Two-thirds don’t meet “proficient” standards. The picture looks about like that whether you consider national or State assessments. Within that statistic, there are deep inequities. A strong majority of incarcerated adults and court-involved youth are struggling readers.
2. **Tutoring is a booming business, but it’s cost prohibitive for most students.** If a family can afford it, they will shell out tens of thousands of dollars to get their kid the literacy instruction they need. It is a tremendous inequity.
3. **Lots of other states have taken action.** Some are getting great results. Some don’t seem to be moving the needle. But policymakers in these states have said enough is enough and prioritized literacy on their policy agenda.

I went “down the rabbit hole.” First, I binged the Emily Hanford [documentary series](#), a convenient entryway into the literacy conversation. I signed up to the “Science of Reading—What I Should Have Learned in College” national and Illinois Facebook pages. I studied findings of the 2000 [National Reading Panel](#) report, and the 2006 National Literacy Panel Report for [Language Minority Children and Youth](#). My podcast queue is heavily literacy-focused, as are most of the personal conversations with whomever I cross paths.

Around the same time as my immersion in the world of literacy, the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus was hard at work negotiating several reform pillars, including education, under the leadership of State Sen. Kimberly Lightford (D—Maywood). Rep. Rita Mayfield (D—Waukegan) had filed an early literacy bill for years, and she was committed to seeing it through. It was in the ILBC bill at one point, but it came out so that it could be worked on further. After that, we started networking more, finding lots of committed parents and advocates, introducing folks to each other, and jointly establishing the [Illinois Early Literacy Coalition](#).

At this point in my journey, here were my top three takeaways:

1. **Reading is not natural.** It literally re-wires our brains as we make connections between the sounds in language, to the letters on a page, to meaning of the text. Some children make the inferences they need to figure it out no matter how they are taught, but most need direct, explicit instruction to “crack the code.”
2. **Phonemic awareness gets shortchanged,** and phonics is often added as a side dish that isn’t well integrated with the rest of the lesson. The five pillars of reading are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension.
3. **Emerging readers should decode words** while reading books with phonics patterns they have learned, rather than being encouraged to figure out the words from looking at pictures or memorizing repetitive text.

I was watching my then-kindergartener go through remote schooling, where his phenomenal teachers delivered instruction from a poorly rated curriculum that “cues” students to look at the pictures in their books when they come to an unknown word. (With the type of books they use, it’s really the only option, since most kindergarteners haven’t learned the phonics patterns to decode “scientist,” or “elephant,” or “porcupine.” These books typically feature a repetitive text pattern on every page, like “I went to the playground and played on the [insert equipment here],” and a picture that hints at that type of playground equipment. More advanced versions might have something different on the last page, like “I love going to the playground.”) I noticed his struggle to remember letters and their sounds, and his adorable language quirks, like saying “tremote” instead of remote, “pagic” instead of package, and “garjib” instead of garbage. This was the first time it occurred to me: he is one of the kids for whom explicit and systematic phonics and phonemic awareness instruction will be absolutely critical.

When I was figuratively at the top of the first peak (“Mt. Stupid”), I think my biggest misconception was that there are two clearcut “sides” to this debate. A term of the 1990s, the “Reading Wars” still seemed to be going strong – with one segment of the population advocating for structured literacy and the other for balanced literacy. (As it turns out, neither is a silver bullet, both can be interpreted in multiple ways, and both actually support a lot of the same principles.) So came my fall from Mt. Stupid into the Valley of Despair.

I thought, “**Explicit, systematic phonics instruction is everything.**” It’s *super* important, but... **Here’s what I oversimplified:**

1. **It’s not more important than other elements** (fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension), and there are more elements to throw into the mix, like oral language development and writing.
2. **Different students will need different dosages** of instruction of these elements. Some might not need much phonics, others will need many repetitions of the phonics patterns they learn, and all should receive the instruction that meets their needs. Students learning English will need a greater focus on oral language development, while students with dyslexia will need a heavy focus on phonemic awareness and phonics.
3. **Phonics is not an end destination.** It is like training wheels. The goal is for word recognition to become so automatic that all of a reader’s attention can be focused on comprehension and analysis.
4. **Integration of the elements is important**, so kids learn phonics patterns, have opportunities to re-integrate those skill into meaningful content, and apply those phonics skills when they read.
5. **Decoding should be the first step to tackling unknown words, but looking at context clues after word identification can support comprehension.** The “three-cueing” approach suggests that multiple, equally good strategies can help students read an unknown word. (What word would make sense? Does it sound right? Does it look right?) Relying on pictures and context as a *primary* way to identify a word defies what we know about how the brain learns to read. But these clues can be helpful to understand at the word level (vocabulary) and at the text level (comprehension).

Springfield is lucky to have a Children's Dyslexia Center that provides an annual, free structured literacy training derived from Orton-Gillingham. I signed up. It's not a small commitment; this will mean tutoring 100 hours over the year in addition to the classes and homework. But this issue has become so professionally and personally relevant, it makes absolute sense for me carve out the time for this. (I'm pretty close! I've got about ten hours to go.)

People who have dedicated their lives to studying how children learn to read are still somewhere on that slope of enlightenment. There's no end to it. Experts who seem aligned with each other and have decades of experience between them still get into heated debates about nuances of specific instructional methods. The research will keep going, and the curriculum will keep developing, and we will refine our beliefs about what works best over and over again for as long as we stay committed to this subject. It's OK that we don't have all the answers.

But it's not OK to ignore this issue any longer. There are policies that Illinois should enact to improve equitable access to evidence-based, comprehensive literacy instruction for all students. None of them are silver bullets. None of them are easy. None of us individually have the only recipe for a policy solution.

After the Right to Read Act (SB 3900 (Lightford/Mayfield)) sparked interest from many groups, the State Board of Education (ISBE) announced that it would sponsor a convening of state, local, and national experts to dig into literacy best practices and policies for Illinois. This is exactly the sort of action we should be looking for. ISBE will be the agency to implement whatever changes are enacted, so it makes perfect sense that it will lead the conversation and assume ownership of this important issue. In fact, one of the things I have discovered is that ISBE has already adopted some pretty great literacy standards!

I am hopeful to see comprehensive and inclusive conversations about this going forward, with an eye toward adopting a literacy plan for the state that can truly support Illinois children – no matter where they live – to develop foundations to become strong readers.

P.S. – If you like puzzles, literacy, and the Illinois legislature, [try your hand at this crossword](#) we created for Stand's newsletter. The more people solve these things, the more I can justify continuing to make them! 😊