

The State Literacy Task Force: Some Comments

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Posted along with other commentaries at:

<https://edsources.org/2022/state-literacy-task-force-echoes-call-for-more-reading-coaches-specialists/669667>

I have a few constructive comments about “State literacy task force echoes call for more reading coaches.” (<https://edsources.org/2022/state-literacy-task-force-echoes-call-for-more-reading-coaches-specialists/669667>)

GRADE THREE

The goal of the task force is that every child in California learns to read by third grade. I suspect that third grade was chosen because of the common assumption that reading ability in grade 3 is a good predictor of later reading ability and educational success. It is, but there is nothing magic about grade three. Reading ability can improve a great deal after age three, in fact at any age, given access to highly interesting and comprehensible reading material (Krashen and McQuillan 2007).

PHONICS AND PHONEMIC AWARENESS

The task force has noted that “positive outlier” districts all “emphasized (1) phonics and phonemic awareness” in kindergarten and first grade, and also (2) provided “rich literacy environments.” I hope the task force is aware that students who are given intensive phonics instruction only do better on tests on which they are asked to pronounce lists of words presented out of context. They do not do significantly better on tests in which they have to understand what they read (Krashen, 2009). In my survey of phonemic awareness research (Krashen, 2001), I found only six published studies of the effect of phonemic awareness training on reading comprehension. Only one showed significant results with children learning to read in English and it involved only 13 children.

But there is a great deal of evidence supporting the power of rich literacy environments, environments offering plenty of books that are comprehensible and highly interesting. The best way to insure both comprehensibility and interest is to encourage self-selection. Research consistently shows that self-selected reading of popular fiction leads to better literacy development (vocabulary, spelling, grammar, writing style; e.g. Krashen, 2004) as well as knowledge in a number of areas: readers know more know more about literature, science, social studies, current events, personal finance, health, and technology (Stanovich and Cunningham, 1993).

I hope the task force knows about the powerful impact of libraries: Students in schools with well-stocked libraries and with credentialed librarians show higher reading competence (<https://keithcurrylance.com/school-library-impact-studies/>). For children of poverty, libraries are often their only source of reading material. Research also tells us that “There is a positive and statistically significant relationship between children’s services in public libraries and early reading success at school” and “the greater the amount of circulated

materials and the greater the attendance at (public) library programs, the more likely kids will do well in reading” (Lance and Marks, 2008).

The title of the article I am responding to is “State literacy task force echoes call for more coaches, specialists.” I think the task force should call for more access to interesting and comprehensible books, and more credentialed librarians.

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