State of Adult Literacy 2004

ProLiteracy

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ProLiteracy President's State of Literacy Report 2004

Introduction

We live in an age when we are surrounded by information. There is information in our e-mail, from the Internet; even our cellular telephones send us text messages. It is ironic, then, that with so much information available to us, more people than ever before are unable to access it. In the year 2000, the number of illiterate adults in the world neared 900 million, almost equivalent to the population of India. Two out of every three of those adults were women. That staggering number only worsens when you factor in those individuals who are marginally literate—adults who are not considered illiterate, but who lack the skills required to be successful in the family, in the workplace, and in the community. To call attention to this problem and bring solutions to bear on it, the United Nations (U.N.) established the Literacy Decade, 2003 to 2012.

ProLiteracy Worldwide is deeply committed to helping adults and families throughout the world improve their literacy skills and to supporting the U.N.'s Literacy Decade. This State of Adult Literacy report focuses on two literacy issues currently affecting the international and the U.S. communities: women's literacy and immigration. The growing interdependence of the world's nations makes it vital that we understand the local implications of global activities.

Background on the Literacy Decade

The international community has a long history of calling attention to the issue of literacy and education. As early as 1948, education was among the basic human rights included in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The delegates to the 1990 World Conference on

Education adopted a *World Declaration on Education for All* (EFA), which stated, "functional illiteracy is a significant problem in all countries, industrialized and developing."[1] The World Conference delegates agreed to several goals related to access and quality in basic education, including a call to reduce the adult illiteracy rate by one-half its 1990 level by the year 2000 and to emphasize women's literacy in order to "significantly reduce the current disparity between male and female illiteracy rates." [2] This goal was reconfirmed at various summits throughout the following decade.

In 1998, the EFA *2000 Assessment* measured progress and reported that, while some progress had been made in educating children, 113 million still remained out of school. The overall adult literacy rate had risen, but at least 875 million adults remained illiterate, 64% of them women.[3]

The World Education Forum of 2000 responded with the *Dakar Framework for Action*, which further affirmed the goal of education for all by 2015. The six education goals detailed in the *Dakar Framework* range from providing early childhood care and education to improving the quality of all aspects of education. Among the goals participants committed to was one to achieve "a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults."[4]

The Literacy Decade

In 2001, members of the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution establishing 2003–2012 as the United Nations Literacy Decade and charged UNESCO with coordinating activities and policy debates. The Literacy Decade focuses on adults' needs to access literacy. Its goal for adult literacy is the same as that outlined in Dakar—to increase literacy rates by 50% by 2015. Statistical evidence revealed that literacy efforts were failing, and the resolution establishing the Literacy Decade was an opportunity to "make a sustained collective effort which will go beyond one-shot programmes or campaigns."[5]

In launching the Literacy Decade, Koichiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, cited as a "persistent scandal" the fact that over 860 million people—two-thirds of whom were women—still lacked access to literacy. The Literacy Decade, Matsuura stated, would place an emphasis on literacy for all with "priority being given to the most disadvantaged groups, especially women and girls, ethnic and linguistic minorities, indigenous populations, migrants and refugees, out-of-school children and youth, and persons with disabilities."[6]

Women and Literacy

In reporting on the progress of *Education for All*, the authors of the EFA *Global Monitoring Report 2003/04* state, "investing in the education of girls has a high pay-off."[7] The authors also indicate that, while women continue to earn less than men, even given the same age and level of education, "the proportionate increase in wages associated with an additional year of schooling tends to be about the same for both sexes."[8] More education can help women to be more productive in the labor force, enabling them to bring more resources to the family and to the economy in general. This is one reason why educating women is seen as a means of reducing poverty. Educating women also ensures that their children "will be healthier, better nourished and have a greater chance of going to school and doing well there."[9]

This is true in industrialized countries as well as in developing ones. Many adult educators in the U.S. are familiar with the work of Thomas G. Sticht, an international consultant in adult education. Sticht's research in the U.S. and other nations presents a viable case for investing in the education of both the parent and the child to maximize the dollars invested. Summarizing his data, Sticht states that the results of several studies suggest that focusing funds on the "education of the children's parents will lead to better educated, more employable parents and more educable children."[10] He highlights how an increase in the mother's level of education has a positive impact on the child at every stage from before birth through the school years. Higher levels of mothers' educational attainment are positively related to higher economic productivity, better health care, healthier children, lower fertility rates, better development of children's literacy skills, more participation in

the children's schooling process, and higher academic achievement by children.[11] Sticht's findings are confirmed by recent studies that showed a country that has a 1% increase in its literacy scores will have 2.5% higher labor productivity than other countries and a gross domestic product per capita 1.5% higher, on average.

Women and girls in many developing countries are excluded from educational opportunities, however. A UNICEF report on girls' education in 21 African countries highlights that poverty is a major factor in whether a child attends school. The report addresses the issue of poor quality in the schools, and it states clearly that priorities should be placed on reaching poor, rural girls: "If we invest time, resources and energy in all children, without paying attention to gender issues, girls are likely to fall through the cracks. Experience has repeatedly shown that investments in girls' education—particularly those directed to the quality of education—benefit all children, including boys. But the reverse does not necessarily hold true."[12]

Barriers to girls' education in developing countries include, but are not limited to, early motherhood, HIV/AIDS, political conflict, and violence in schools. In southern Africa and the Caribbean, girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are infected by HIV/AIDS at rates four to seven times higher than boys. There is evidence that education can make a difference. A study in Zambia, for example, showed HIV/AIDS cases in young women between 15 and 19 dropped from 27% to 15%, with declines "greatest among those with secondary and higher levels of education."[13] This would seem to support other findings that show that educating women leads to better health for them and for their families. If we hope to control the pandemic of HIV/AIDS, then we must address the issue of education that serves to inform individuals and helps prevent the spread of the virus. But the reverse also is true. To address education, HIV/AIDS must be addressed, since the virus has decimated the number of available teachers and has kept many children from attending school. This highlights the importance of ProLiteracy's strategy in southern Africa, where its HIV/AIDS literacy-training manual is being used successfully.

Education cannot be seen as the only cure for many of the world's pressing issues. It is, however, a critical part of the required solution. Higher levels of education are associated with longer life expectancy. Lower levels of education are associated with poor health, early pregnancy, and higher infant and mother mortality. "One in every 10 births worldwide is to a mother who is still herself a child." (aged 10–19)[14] "Girls in their teens are twice as likely to die from pregnancy- and child-birth-related causes compared with older women."[15] "Girls who are not attending school are more likely to become mothers at a dangerously early age, and girls in school who marry young or become pregnant usually leave school."[16]

Statistics show that young women who are educated tend to marry later, have fewer children, and raise healthier, better-nourished children. They also are more likely to send their children—including girls—to school.[17] This pattern also is true in the U.S. The U.S. has the highest teen birth rate of all industrialized countries, with nearly 900,000 teenage girls becoming pregnant each year. Only one-third of these teenage mothers obtain a high school diploma. The related U.S. demographics for high teen birth rates may not be surprising: they tend to be in "states with large rural populations, above average poverty rates, and lower than average education levels."[18]

The economic prospects for pregnant, teenage dropouts are bleak. "High school dropouts are about three times as likely to slip into poverty from one year to the next as those who have finished high school."[19]

This leads to an intergenerational cycle of low literacy and poverty. Young mothers in developing countries often work, but generally in nonsalaried jobs such as selling produce or sewing. The hardships are even greater if the women are young and unmarried, and "many are forced to sell sex to support themselves and their children."[20] In the U.S., lack of literacy and job skills often requires the single mother to turn to welfare for assistance. This cycle continues, with the poorest, least-educated women most likely to have children while young, and as a result, they and their children remain in poverty with little opportunity for education and better jobs.

Women in the U.S. have made great strides in equal educational opportunity, but economic equality has not followed. In 2003, more women in the U.S. completed high school than men, with an 85% completion rate for women and 84% for men. But the percentage of men who completed college (29%) is still higher than the percentage of women (26%), though these figures are changing. Women in the 25–29 year age group outpace their male counterparts in completing college.[21] Many institutions of higher learning are reporting higher freshmen enrollment rates for women than for men. Both men and women earn more with additional levels of education, but in the U.S., women earn significantly less than men at every level of education.[22]

Functional literacy—the level needed to be considered literate in today's world—is not enough if U.S. women are to help their families economically, or are to support them adequately for women who are single parents. Women need to be more than functionally literate; they must acquire advanced literacy skills. A high school diploma or its equivalent, however, remains the basic building block for additional education. The target population for adult education services in the U.S. includes adults (over the age of 16) without a high school diploma. According to the U.S. Department of Education, that equates to 51 million adults, or approximately 23% of the adult population. Men and women are equally distributed in this target population. About one-quarter of the target population live in households that are at or below the poverty level.[23]

Policy makers often ask a polarizing question: do you educate the young child so that she grows up to be literate, or do you educate the parent so that she can help her children with their education? This, of course, is the wrong question. It is critical to address literacy for both children and adults. It was not the U.N.'s intent to detract from the Education for All initiative when it established the Literacy Decade, but rather to complement it by calling more attention to adult literacy as a vital, but often overlooked, component of any program to improve access to basic education. As an adult literacy organization, ProLiteracy applauds this approach.

Do not assume, however, that we at ProLiteracy are not concerned about education for children and youth, or that we fail to see the interconnectedness of these issues. We assert that it is as important to educate mothers and fathers as it is to educate their daughters and sons. This is a difficult concept for many to accept. If UNESCO projections hold true, there will be 107 million illiterate young people swelling the ranks of the adult illiterate population by 2015. Again, "more than half—67 million—will be young women."[24] This is a compelling statistic. Components of it are the driving force behind most literacy programs for children. Yet research and our field experience show that no matter how much we emphasize literacy for children, if children come from homes in which the adults have low literacy skills, those children will have a very high chance of becoming low-literate adults.[25] There are many organizations that focus on literacy for children, but few that focus on adult literacy. This is the special role that ProLiteracy plays.

Immigration

Is there a relationship between low literacy and immigration? Are there reasons to be concerned about the effect of immigration on literacy programs? The answer to both questions is yes. The *2003 ProLiteracy President's State of Adult Literacy Report* looked at immigration and literacy in the U.S.

People emigrate for many reasons. Some flee intolerance, oppression, persecution, or armed conflict. Others seek better opportunities for themselves and their children. Still others emigrate to reunite with family members who also emigrated.

Immigration is a global issue. The number of international immigrants, or people living outside their countries of birth, more than doubled between the mid-1970s and 2004, to about 175 million. The greatest numbers have gone to the richest countries, but many also have emigrated to developing countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. "The number of immigrants in the European Union is up 75% since 1980."[26] During this same period, the number of foreign-born in the United States rose by 145%, from 14 million to 35 million.[27]

Many of those entering new countries have limited educational backgrounds, languages different from the receiving country's native language, and different cultural norms. These differences can create challenges for both the immigrants and their new countries. Reactions are mixed. Policy makers have tried to stem the flow of both legal and illegal immigration. The U.S. controls its flow of immigration in many ways, including restricting the ways in which a person can become a legal resident, requiring proof of substantial income as a means of avoiding an inflow of impoverished immigrants, and limiting the number of immigrants from various countries.

Because they are willing to accept low-paying, demanding, and unpleasant jobs, immigrants serve the economies of their new countries. Yet their need for specialized educational and social services can create a drain on those same economies. Research shows that, over time, immigration benefits the economy more than it drains it. In July 2000, *Time Europe* reported, "last year the 16 million legal immigrants in Western Europe earned more than $460 billion. The number of self-employed foreigners in the E.U. has increased by close to 20% over the past seven years...In Italy, one-third of the labor in the industrial and service sectors is done by immigrants, though they comprise just 2% of the population. Chinese immigrants in Britain are more likely than whites to hold professional jobs and earn incomes above $40,000, while Britain's 900,000 Indian residents tally larger family incomes and higher rates of home ownership than the general population."[28]

In the U.S., immigrants played a large role in generating growth in the civilian labor force during the 1990s. "An above-average proportion of the nation's new immigrants were of working age, and many were in the 20–39-year-old age group, which has high rates of labor force participation."[29] U.S. Census data show that, from 1990 to 2000, "the impact of new immigration on labor force growth varied considerably by geographic region, ranging from a low of 12% of labor force growth in the East South Central region to a high of 372% in the Middle Atlantic region... All the growth in the resident civilian labor force of the Pacific, New England, and Middle Atlantic regions took place as a consequence of new foreign immigration over the decade."[30]

Given the overall benefit to the economy that immigrants create over time, ProLiteracy Worldwide recommends forming a policy in the U.S. that would help these individuals successfully acclimate to their new culture similar to the way in which European countries try to help immigrants learn their new languages and become better assimilated into their new countries.[31] In 1998, Dutch law required "newcomers to take 500 hours of classes that provide language instruction and tips on everything from riding the tram to enrolling children in school."[32] By 2000, there were 10,000 people on waiting lists, demonstrating the desire of people to become better assimilated to their new environments.[33]

Adult education programs in the U.S. also have felt the impact of increased immigration. Based on the 2000 census, 31% of the target population for adult education (adults aged 16 or older without a high school diploma) spoke little or no English. Add adults who have a high school diploma, but who indicated on the census that they speak English less than "very well," and this number increases by 16%.[34] The demand for English-as-a-second-language (ESL) services is so high that many ProLiteracy Worldwide programs have ESL waiting lists. In 1997-98, 48% of adults served in state-administered adult education programs were ESL learners.[35] Given this demand, Congress added a new English Literacy/Civics program for adults in the late 1990s and appropriated $70 million to it over each of the last several years. Even with this effort, ESL waiting lists exist.[36]

Research suggests that the ability of the U.S. to improve in future worldwide literacy assessments depends, in part, on its ability to improve the English-based literacy proficiencies of immigrants. A comparison of the literacy levels of adults in the U.S. with those of adults in 19 other higher-income countries demonstrates that U.S. adults performed at an average level of literacy skill. Researchers contend that this might be due to the number of foreign-born adults in the U.S.: 1) the U.S. has the fifth highest share of foreign-born in its adult population; 2) one-third of the foreign-born adults in the U.S. did not complete high school; and 3) the majority of foreign-born came from non-English-speaking countries and have limited English speaking skills.[37] Improvement in future comparisons

will require a greater investment in adult basic education, which is currently below average. Such an investment also will help assimilate immigrants into the U.S. labor market and improve their earning power.

Conclusion

The rate of adult illiteracy throughout the world is staggering and affects all nations. To ignore the problem because of its size, or to deal with it only by working with children, is an inadequate response. Every country must take an active role in improving literacy skills, especially for women, within its own borders for its native-born population and its foreign-born immigrants. Industrialized countries also must provide technical and financial support to developing countries to assist them in meeting their goals to reduce illiteracy by half by 2015. All countries should work closely with UNESCO in calling attention to the needs of low-literate adults by actively participating in the Literacy Decade.

To begin action on the Literacy Decade, ProLiteracy Worldwide calls upon the U.S. government to adopt the Literacy Decade International Plan of Action and implement its principal strategies by:

1. Placing literacy at the center of all levels of national education systems and developmental efforts;
2. Adopting an approach for promoting synergy between formal and nonformal education;
3. Promoting an environment supportive of literacy and a culture of reading;
4. Ensuring community involvement;
5. Building partnerships at all levels; and
6. Developing systematic monitoring and evaluation processes supported by research and data.

ProLiteracy also calls upon Congress to authorize programs for adult education through the development of an Omnibus Literacy Bill and through reauthorization of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act under the Workforce Investment Act.

The United States should be a leader in providing basic education for its adult population, native-born and foreign-born. It can be a world-class leader in providing basic education just as it has been in providing higher education. It is time for the U.S. to extend basic educational opportunities to all its citizens, not just its children. It is good policy, not just for individuals, but also for families, communities, employers, and all of society.

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