

**Edited by L John Chapman
and Pam Czerniewska
for the Diploma in Reading
Development at
the Open University**

Reading

**From Process
to Practice**

Reading From Process to Practice

Edited by

L. John Chapman and Pam Czerniewska
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Introduction

The nature of the reading process and the ways of teaching reading have been the subject of much debate. Countless books, papers, articles, schemes and items of equipment have grown out of such argument, each representing and defending different definitions of what is involved in the development of reading. This collection of articles will not clear the confusion by stating yet another 'right way' to teach reading. Rather it is a *selection* of papers about reading which reflect current, often contradictory, trends and perspectives.

Our aim is to provide teachers with a reasoned base from which to participate in the debate on reading, as it affects them directly. This Reader will have achieved little if it fails to contribute to the teacher's work in the classroom. A teacher's involvement with the issues of current concern may be, and should be, reflected in his or her planning and classroom practice.

Section 1 Looking at Literacy

The teacher of reading is involved, whether this is consciously realised or not, in the development of a literate society. And every teacher, therefore, needs to determine what level of literacy is demanded by society, what role he or she should take in achieving the desired standard of literacy, and what the implications of literacy are in a world context.

The Unesco report (1.1) presents a world view of literacy. Too often we limit our thoughts to the relatively small proportion of illiterates in our own country and fail to see it in its international context.

The problems facing developing nations are also facing industrialised nations. Literacy, as the report points out, is 'inextricably intertwined with other aspects of national development . . . [and] . . . national development as a whole is bound up with the world context'. Literacy is not a by-product of social and economic development—it is a component of that development. Literacy can help people to function more effectively in a changing environment and ideally will enable the individual to change the environment so that it functions more effectively.

Literacy programmes instituted in different countries have taken and are taking different approaches to the problem: for example the involvement of voluntary non-governmental organisations, which underlines the importance of seeing literacy not as a condition imposed on people but as a consequence of active participation within society. Perhaps we can learn from the attempts of other countries to provide an adequate 'literacy environment'.

Who are the 'illiterates' and how do we define them? At what point do we decide that illiteracy ends and literacy begins? Robert

4 *Looking at Literacy*

Hillerich (1.2) addresses these questions. An illiterate, he finds, 'may mean anything from one who has *no* formal schooling to one who has attended four years or less, to one who is unable to read or write at a level necessary to perform successfully in his social position.' Literacy, he points out, is not something one either has or has not got: 'Any definition of literacy must recognize this quality as a continuum, representing all degrees of development.'

An educational definition—i.e. in terms of grades completed or skills mastered—is shown to be inadequate in that educationally defined mastery may bear only minimal relation to the language proficiency needed in coping with environmental demands. From a sociological/economic viewpoint the literacy needs of individuals vary greatly, and any definition must recognise the needs of the individual to engage effectively and to act with responsible participation.

Such a broadened definition excludes assessment based on a 'reading-level type'; assessment must, rather, be flexible to fit both purpose and population.

Two points emerge from this article:

to what extent has the educational system considered the literacy requirements of adult living, and built these into the reading curriculum?

and

to what extent are Hillerich's concluding remarks merely optimistic hopes rather than operational goals?

The Unesco report and Hillerich's paper take for granted that literacy is a necessary condition for the development of society.

But there are other views about literacy which need to be voiced alongside these. Neil Postman (1.3) challenges the promotion of literacy as 'a major force for political conservatism'. His major tenet is that 'to teach reading, or even to promote vigorously the teaching of reading, is to take a definite political position on how people should behave and on what they ought to value.' The printed word, for Postman, is a medium which leads to 'political and social stasis'. While schools limit themselves to the written media, he contends, education works against change and fails to generate new patterns of behaviour.

Whether or not you agree with the stand taken by Postman, it is worth asking yourself how well you can answer his final questions:

What is reading good for? What is it better or worse than? What are my motives in promoting it? And the ultimate political question of all, 'Whose side am I on?'

One response to these questions is made by Frank Smith (1.4). He argues that Postman's view of the printed medium as the cause of educational disenchantment and failure is ill founded. The 'malaise' of schools is not that they teach reading but *how* they teach it. Adverse effects of reading, such as suggested by Postman, are the consequence of the way reading is taught. Reading, or in fact any subject, will produce 'mental stultification' if schools do not aim for independent exercise of thought . . . 'The price of literacy need not be the reader's free will and intelligence'.

Both Postman's and Smith's articles are highly polemical but the arguments cannot be easily discounted. Without deciding what are our motives for fostering reading skills, and how best we can promote literacy, we may find that, as Smith suggests, 'ignorance is clustered in our educational institutions.'

Taken together, the papers in this section provide insights into the problem of literacy—its meaning, its definitions, and hence the battlegrounds on which the teaching of reading takes place.

1. 1 Literacy in the world: shortcomings, achievements and tendencies

Unesco

World literacy: 1965–1975

I The quantitative aspects of the problem

An overall view of the situation. The number of illiterates has always been difficult to calculate. Partly because figures are not always reliable, and also because where illiteracy rates are high they are either unobtainable or incomplete. Even when obtainable, they are often incomparable, because 'illiteracy' is defined differently in different places. Nevertheless in as far as general estimations have been made, figures available at the beginning of the last quarter of the 20th century show that the world is still far from reaching universal literacy. Although the percentage of illiteracy had steadily fallen from 44.3% in 1950 to 39.3% in 1960 and 34.2% in 1970, the total number of adult illiterates in the world had risen and is now approximately 800,000,000. This increase in absolute terms of the illiteracy population must be imputed to the population explosion, and inadequate as well as misdirected educational provision.

In 1970 Africa and the Arab States still had the largest percentage of illiteracy in their adult populations, followed by Asia—then Latin America. All four regions decreased their illiteracy rate by between 7 and 9% between 1960 and 1970. But whereas in 1970 this left a rate of illiteracy in Latin America of about 24%, both in Africa and the Arab States it was still over 70% and in Asia just under 50%.

Source: Unesco, 'Literacy in the world since the 1966 Teheran Conference: shortcomings, achievements, tendencies', International Symposium for Literacy, Persepolis, 1975.

Illiteracy has a close correlation with poverty. In the twenty-five least developed countries, where the per capita product is less than \$100 a year, illiteracy rates are over 80%. It should be said also that countries with the highest illiteracy rates tend also to have higher population growth rates. Further, the proportion of women illiterates is steadily growing. In 1960, 58% of illiterates were women; by 1970 this had risen to 60%. In those ten years the number of illiterate men rose by 8 millions and that of illiterate women by 40 millions.

The proportionate number of illiterates living in rural areas is also much higher than in urban areas. Even though much progress has been made in the provision of primary school education in the last few decades, many children still do not enter formal primary schools, and many others drop out before completion. For example, statistics given for enrolment ratios in the twenty-five least developed countries indicate that if trends observed in the last two decades were to continue to 1985, less than 30% of the children aged 6–11 would be in school by end of the period. Thus new generations of illiterates continue to join the adult population. As a result, illiteracy is growing on the world scale.

II The qualitative aspects of the problem

The limiting factors. Many governments in Africa, Latin America and Asia have taken realistic and imaginative steps to overcome illiteracy. In certain countries, through the dynamic mobilization of their resources, illiteracy has been virtually completely eradicated; others, due to apathy, negligence (even when resources have been available) and other causes have failed to tackle their problem with serious intent. Further, the developed countries have not given the eradication of illiteracy a high priority in their bilateral or multilateral aid programmes.

But the problem has still greater dimension—illiteracy is caught in a vicious circle: not only is it a source of inequalities but it is simultaneously the product of other inequalities in a society (e.g. political, social and economic). Centuries of colonial rule held back the right of people to their own self-determination. Existing social structures in some countries do not favour equality of opportunity; education has often been misdirected, with undue emphasis on the training of elites and the adoption of standards inappropriate for the participation of the general population, and even reforms have led to new structures thus favouring elites. Social/economic situations still exist in which literacy is not required (subsistence farming, barter trading systems, etc.). Some indigenous cultures have been absorbed by foreign influences, often leading to cultural

alienation. In many countries land reforms and attempts at income redistribution have not yet been undertaken. These and many other factors have inhibited both the provision of literacy programmes and the motivation of potential learners.

Yet even in situations where literacy programmes do exist, many obstacles hinder progress and efficient planning. These include lack of human and material resources; social structures which place the illiterate majority at a disadvantage; an unrealistic content to literacy materials; bad communications; lack of transport facilities; scattered population groups; multiple language situations; problems of choice of language for instruction; lack of written material; lack of trained teachers. But perhaps the most important of all is 'the lack of literacy environment', i.e. the social structures and facilities geared to the uses of literacy.

Major facts of literacy action in the last ten years

III Policies and structures

Planning. Many countries have taken far-reaching steps in the field of literacy planning. Due to profound differences in national structures, these steps varied very widely; but the aim of many of them was to introduce more rigorous programming and to establish medium-term objectives. Some Arab countries, for example, have set themselves the goal of total literacy, within certain age-limits, in the space of ten years (fifteen in other cases). In Burma, the Philippines, Madagascar and Tanzania, government decrees and related regulations provide for systematic literacy campaigns. Brazil envisages to reduce the percentage of adult illiteracy to less than 10% for 1980; in Iran, the fourth five-year development plan (1967-72) aimed at a 30% reduction in the illiteracy rate.

Recently two major industrial countries announced national programmes for their adult illiterate population, which ran into millions because it is not only in developing countries that illiteracy is a problem. Furthermore, these programmes are not considered as emergency programmes, but long-term programmes, as the provision and content of existing formal primary education is not expected to overcome the problem of a substantial number of drop-outs who form the core of the semi-literate population.

Legislation. Some countries have taken legislative action in favour of literacy: for example, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Paraguay, Chad, Madagascar, Togo, Indonesia and Iran, where decrees giving priority to literacy

programmes were adopted. In Libya, Iraq, the Arab Republic of Yemen, Syria, Sudan, CAR and Mali, laws have been promulgated making it compulsory for illiterate adults to attend courses. Elsewhere, in Guatemala, Venezuela, the Congo Republic and the Arab Republic of Egypt, for example, the aim of new legislation was to generalize the system under which enterprises invest a part of their profits in literacy programmes for their personnel. In El Salvador and Ecuador, in Ethiopia and Somalia, recent laws required literate adults to assist in the education of their illiterate compatriots.

Other laws and decrees aimed at the reform of administrative structures in the light of the demands of literacy development. Thus new national literacy services have been created in the Congo Republic, Dahomey, Ethiopia, Korea and Mauritania. In Indonesia, Madagascar, Mauritius, Argentina, Paraguay and the Arab Republic of Egypt existing institutions have been reorganized, while many countries have set up entirely new regional, provincial or municipal structures for literacy.

Administration. Various countries have approached the literacy work as an endeavour of a multiple character, vesting, therefore, the responsibility of the literacy action in more than one governmental department; for example, as in Colombia, Burma, Nepal, Gabon and Senegal. In others—India, Thailand, Ivory Coast and Mali—national literacy committees representing a very wide selection of competent organs have had the explicit tasks of advising the government in defining the national policy. In Algeria, the Arab Republic of Egypt, Iraq and Tunisia, these committees included also spokesmen for political parties, social associations or trade unions and co-operatives.

Often, literacy work has been placed under a variety of authorities, thus in Afghanistan, for example, there have been programmes running concurrently under the authority of the Ministry of Education, of the Department of Rural Development of the Ministry of the Interior, of the Welfare Society (for women only) and of the Army. In Latin America private undertakings operated many literacy programmes in conjunction with vocational training centres of an autonomous character. In certain African countries bodies responsible for literacy work have been placed under the authority of a Minister other than the Minister of Education, such as the Minister of Community Development in Zambia, the Prime Minister in Jamaica, the Ministry of Co-operatives and Social Services in Kenya and the Minister of Local Administration in Swaziland.

A new organizational approach. The Mobral system, which started its activities in 1967 in Brazil, in its massive tackling of the illiteracy problem, has developed and applied innovative organizational and managerial patterns, so different from those of traditional public administration. The main features of Mobral's strategy, by which it seems that it has been possible to overcome some of the difficulties arising from the mass approach, have been the following:

(a) the illiteracy problem is approached on a massive scale, but its eradication is attempted by progressive operational targets, different for each state of the Union. Six states should have reached the targets in 1975, three should reach them in 1976, four in 1977, nine in 1978;

(b) the programmes operate at four levels: central, regional, State and municipal; the first three levels have a directional character, the fourth has the responsibility for execution; this decentralization reduces Mobral's administrative machinery, strengthens local institutions, and makes easier the adjustment of the programme to local conditions;

(c) the clear, but not rigid, priorities which have been established: (i) to attack illiteracy first in urban areas, and (ii) to direct the literacy action to the 15-35-year age group preferably;

(d) the special nature of its administration; the Executive Secretary, in fact, is assisted by Advisory Bodies on Organization, Methods, Supervision and Planning, as well as by five Management Divisions: those of Pedagogical Activities, Mobilization, Research and Training, Finance and Supporting Activities.

New institutions. It should be said that a fair number of new institutions have been established recently at national and regional levels, in several countries, with the aim of providing technical orientation and assistance in literacy research, planning, organization, training, implementation and evaluation. Among the regional bodies, one may mention the Regional Council for Adult Education and Literacy in Africa (CREAA), which has its headquarters in Lomé, Togo; this Council has the aim of promoting and co-ordinating literacy work in the nations of the West African region; the Society for the Promotion of Adult Literacy in Africa, Nairobi, Kenya (AFROLIT); the African Adult Education Association (AAEA) at the Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria; the Arab States Literacy Organization (ARLO) in Cairo, Arab Republic of Egypt; the Asian-South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE) in Sydney, Australia, and the very recent International Adult Education Council in Toronto, Canada.

Among national bodies: the National Centre for Adult Education and Training in Iran which was established by the

Iranian government, with Unesco co-operation, for carrying out methodological research and studies on problems concerning adult education and literacy; the Regional Centre for Adult Education (CREA) in Caracas, Venezuela, and the National Institute for Functional Literacy and Applied Linguistics (INAFILA) in Bamako, Mali.

Finally, many university schools of education, in the Americas as well as in Africa, Asia and Europe, have sponsored literacy studies or organized courses in literacy, as, for example, the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, the University of Teheran in Iran, the University of Reading in Britain, Indiana University in the USA and Nice University in France. Courses in literacy have also been included in teacher-training colleges' curricula, as in the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad and Liberia.

The NGOs' contribution. The years 1965–75 have seen a continuing participation of non-governmental organizations in literacy activities throughout the world. Women's organizations, youth committees, students' teams, co-operatives, trade unions, groups of social action, voluntary agencies, individual leaders have provided a large contribution to literacy by launching and carrying out local activities, as well as by organizing national or local meetings, by holding motivational discussions and lectures, by planning and conducting researches and studies, and by training cadres and agents who had to take part in field operations.

A growing contribution to literacy has also been made by religious bodies: Koranic, Buddhist, Christian. Indeed in many countries the first alphabets were developed by religious teachers, the first written manuscripts were religious texts, the first books to be translated and written were often religious books, the first schools were established by religious ministers, and the first purpose of literacy was conceived as religious teaching. We now find many religious leaders regarding literacy not only as an instrument of moral teaching and spiritual development, but also, in a wider context, as a factor in social and economic progress.

The co-ordination among the various non-governmental organizations is provided by their International Federations having consultative status with Unesco. Among the most active are found the following: the World Labour Confederation; the International Women's Council; the World Federation of the Democratic Women's Associations; Caritas International; International Council of Cinema and T.V.; World Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations; World Young Women's Christian