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National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives

*Introduction to the Transaction edition
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Reflecting on the publication of the first edition of *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, we find that the lessons learned from surveying comparatively four centuries of literacy movements are as important today as two decades ago. The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning announced on September 6, 2007 that “International Literacy Day provides an occasion to put the spotlight on the neglected goal of literacy which is crucial not only for achieving education for all but, more broadly, for attaining the overarching goal of reducing human poverty.” Despite major international initiatives spanning over five decades to reduce illiteracy and provide basic education to all, current data indicate that more than 860 million adults lack minimal capacities to read, write, and calculate. Two-thirds of this number are women. Within regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, over 50 percent of the population is illiterate.¹

What Have We Learned?

In examining large-scale societal mobilizations to achieve universal levels of literacy since the Protestant Reformation, we found these enduring lessons:

- Literacy must be conceptualized in relationship to other critical factors (such as economic realities, social and political structures, and cultural patterns), not viewed in and of itself;
- Literacy efforts need to last long enough to be effective;
- Local initiative should be mobilized in conjunction with national will;
- There will be a significant minority who will oppose or not be reached by literacy efforts of centralized authorities;
- Eventually emphasis will have to be placed on schooling for youth (in order to limit future illiteracy); and
- Literacy must be viewed and understood in its various contexts.

A Focus on Campaigns and Movements

Although we focused on centrally organized literacy mobilizations by secular and religious authorities, several of our case studies looked at largely decentralized, non-school-based literacy movements in countries such as Sweden (seventeenth to nineteenth centuries) and the United States (nineteenth century). In recent years, initiatives at both the international and local levels strongly advocate the need for comprehensive, life-long education that galvanizes all agencies of a society in the long-term task of providing “critical literacy.” By this, educators mean a full range of abilities to decode and encode various symbols systems that equip individuals to live fuller lives, contribute to their societies, and relate successfully to an expanding circle of communities. For many scholars as well as policy-makers, the perspective of literacy campaigns as social and political movements is very useful.

In fact, as our lessons indicate, a campaign is only the initiation of decades-long efforts to spread and reinforce literacy. Among twentieth-century campaigns, we find that the 1961 Cuban campaign was followed by the “battle for third grade,” followed by battles for sixth- and ninth-grade levels of literacy skills. In China, initial estimates of the number of characters to be considered literate have increased as the evolving context required more sophisticated reading and writing skills. In Nicaragua, the 1980 campaign was followed by years of war and a struggle for national survival, leading, in 2007, to massive new literacy efforts.

Refocusing Literacy Efforts

In the North and West, as well as in the South, the task has shifted from “functional” to “critical literacy.” This literacy seeks to enable people to understand and cope with the multiple forces, both local and global, that impinge on their lives.

As we noted in the first edition of *National Literacy Campaigns*, the world map of illiteracy is also the map of poverty, a fact recognized by activists within the field of literacy. If, as we also have noted, the meaning of literacy is context-based, then the evolving global economy and national development policies implemented around the world, has led, in many cases, to increasing impoverishment of billions of people. Moreover, an economic and social agenda advocated by major international financial and technical assistance agencies, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and various binational technical assistance agencies (North American and European) has led to the decentralization and privatization of public school systems, the principal agency for reaching and teaching the youth of a country. This agenda, we believe, may seriously lessen the role of the state in committing the resources necessary to meet the challenge of achieving universal literacy.

There is a need for a complementarity of efforts between formal school systems and out-of-school programs for adults as well for the young between governmental and non-governmental organizations, between international and national and local agencies in providing an infrastructure of opportunities to acquire and practice literacy skills. Further, education sector initiatives need to be complemented by economic policies that reduce poverty and increase meaningful employment prospects. Literacy must be tied to roles that engage acquired skills.

Unfortunately, literacy initiatives following the international conference on "Education for All" held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, have tended to concentrate primarily on providing universal basic schooling for children in grades one to four. Efficiency guidelines provided by international donors like the World Bank have recommended that literacy efforts be focused on adults under thirty-five years of age. For the 2000 "World Education Forum," in Dakar, Senegal, networks of educators across the globe pointed out these shortcomings concerning the conceptualization and implementation of literacy programs.² Their critique of most governmental literacy efforts, or lack thereof, underscores many of the issues posed by Graff in his writings on "the literacy myth."³

"Literacy Myths"

Too often, literacy campaigns and movements rest on what one of us has designated "the literacy myth," a powerful and enduring force, and often a misleading or disappointing one. As Graff and Duffy write, the "literacy myth" refers to the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the ac-

quisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility. Despite many unsuccessful attempts to measure it, literacy in this formulation has been invested with immeasurable and indeed almost ineffable qualities, purportedly conferring upon practitioners a predilection toward social order, an elevated moral sense, and a metaphorical “state of grace.” As essays in this book show, such presumptions have a venerable historical lineage and have been expressed, in different forms, from antiquity through the Renaissance and Reformation, and again throughout the era of the Enlightenment, during which literacy was linked to progress, order, transformation, and control. Associated with these beliefs is the conviction that the benefits ascribed to literacy cannot be attained in other ways, nor can they be attributed to other factors, whether economic, political, cultural, or individual. Rather, literacy stands alone as the independent and critical variable.⁴

Among the myths is that illiteracy is largely a problem of developing countries of the “South,” despite significant pockets of adults unable to read and write in Europe and North America. Equally deceptive is the fact that literacy is defined and measured with regard to a population’s ability to read and write in colonial languages; this is particularly the case with regard to Africa. The persistence of colonial languages in the upper levels of African school systems fails to take into account *lingua franca*, such as Kiswahili, that enable individuals to interact effectively with another and communicate across national borders.⁵ The emphasis on English as a universal language leads to its use as the medium of instruction in higher education to the detriment even of well-established national languages.

A Call to Action

A more realistic and holistic view of literacy builds upon the knowledge, skills, and experiences of individuals within their specific circumstances. It takes into account basic learning needs and emphasizes learning, not only top-down instruction.⁶ It appreciates the power of national campaigns but also their limits. A humanistic and democratic appreciation of literacy inextricably involves enabling people to not only understand their rapidly changing contexts, but also to take action to achieve more equitable and open societies.

As Cairns has observed, literacy is fundamentally a political issue involving these questions: “What sort of society do we want? Are we seriously improving the skills and training of the poorly educated? Will

we make this a priority, and commit funds and expertise in age of dwindling resources?” He goes on to note that these questions lead to others which “starkly clarify the values we put on people and their ability to realize their full potential.”⁷

Similarly, at the Literacy Decade launch ceremony at the United Nations, in February, 2003, Deputy Secretary General Louise Frechette stressed “literacy remains part of the unfinished business of the twentieth century. One of the success stories of the twenty-first century must be the extension of literacy to include all humankind.”⁸

Notes

1. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, “Announcement, 6 September 2007: International Literacy Day 2007: Springboard to the African Regional Conference in Support of Global Literacy,” 1.
2. See, for example, EFA Global Monitoring Report, *Literacy for Life* (Paris: UNESCO, 2005); Rosa-María Torres, “Lifelong Learning: A New Momentum and a New Opportunity for Adult Basic Learning and Education (ABLE) in the South,” Instituto Fronesis (Quito-Buenos Aires), available on the Internet at [www.fronesis.org]; last accessed 9/16/2007; and “Día Internacional de la Alfabetización”; Foro Latinoamericano de Políticas Educativas (FLAPE). *Info-novedades*, No. 37, September 7, 2007, available on the Internet at [www.foro-latino.org], last accessed on September 10, 2007. Also see, September 8, 2007, International Literacy Day memo to the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) Section to Mr. Mark Richmond (director of the Division for the Coordination of UN Priorities in Education) and Ms. Margarete Sachs-Israel (head of the UNLD) from Members of the Latin American Group of Specialists in Literacy and Written Culture (GLEACE) and the Latin American Council for Adult Education (CREAAL), both available on the Internet respectively at [http://www.crefal.edu.mx/], and [http://www.creal.org/]; last accessed September 10, 2007.
3. Harvey J. Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Cultural Integration in the Nineteenth-Century City* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1991 ed.).
4. Harvey J. Graff and John Duffy, “The Literacy Myth,” in *Encyclopedia of Language and Literacy*, Vol. 2 Literacy, ed. Nancy Hornberger and Brian Street (Berlin and New York: Springer 2007-), 41-52, chapter 3 in this volume.
5. Birgit Brock-Utne, *Whose Education for All?: The Recolonization of the African Mind* (Boulder, Co.: NetLibrary, Inc., 2000); and her “Education for All—In Whose Language?” *Oxford Review of Education*, 27 (March 2001): 115–134.
6. See, for example, Torres, “Lifelong Learning.”
7. John C. Cairns, in “Introduction” to Audrey Thomas, “Adult Illiteracy in Canada—A Challenge,” Occasional Paper 42 (Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 1983), 8.
8. Frechette as quoted in “Literacy as Freedom”—United Nations Launches Literacy Decade (2003-2012) by Horst Rutsch for the *United Nations Chronicle Online Edition*. Available on the Internet at [http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2003/webArticles/022103_literacy.html]; last accessed on September 17, 2007.