

EFA Global Monitoring Report on Literacy: Past, Present and (Fresh Hope for the) Future?

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Main Points

- Past: Myths of our literacy ancestors
- Present: Where the GMR has brought us
- (Fresh Hope for the) Future: Three key areas with practical consequences for EFA, MDG and UN Literacy Decade



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The Past: Myths of our literacy ancestors

1. Literacy changes the way humans think and their intelligence.
 - or: Literacy is like a "lightbulb" illuminating the world for the blind
2. Illiteracy in Country A or Region B will be eradicated in the year 2015
3. The literacy "solution" is, simply:
(choose one): silver bullet curriculum, correct language choice, political will, more money, "each one teach one", etc.
4. We know what "literacy" is.



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The Present: The GMR on Literacy



Yes, we are happy... because the GMR lays out and clarifies some of the main problems and debates that have befuddled the literacy field, such as...



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The GMR and 10 common literacy debates

1. Basic definitions, including: Literacy-illiteracy vs. scale of skills
2. Non-formal education (NFE) vs. formal schooling
3. Literacy Development vs. Literacy Development
4. Literacy vs. literacies
5. Literacy as inherent 'human right' vs. as development 'tool'
6. Mother-tongue vs. second language instruction
7. Quantity (mass campaigns > access) vs. quality (niche programs > content)
8. Being literate vs. Becoming literate
9. International need for data vs. local need for data
10. Increased supply vs. increased demand

→ A brief look at some of the key GMR findings, and then we return to the last 3 items



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World, regional and national literacy rates have improved, but at a decreasing rate...

Table T.3: Global and regional trends in adult literacy rates, 1950 to 2000-2004

	Adult literacy rates (%)						Increase in literacy rates (%)		
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000-2004	1970 to 1980	1980 to 1990	1990 to 2000-2004
World	56.7	60.7	63.4	69.7	75.4	81.9	6.0	6.2	6.5
Developing countries	...	47.7	58.0	67.0	76.4	71.6	21.6	15.5	14.9
Developed and transition countries	...	94.5	96.4	98.8	99.0	99.0	2.0	1.8	0.5
Selected regions
Sub-Saharan Africa	...	27.8	37.8	49.9	59.7	68.0	30.0	32.1	19.8
Arab States	...	18.9	29.8	39.2	50.0	62.7	36.1	27.7	25.3
East Asia and the Pacific	...	39.9	70.3	81.8	91.4	92.3	22.3	16.4	11.2
South and West Asia	...	31.6	39.3	47.5	58.6	64.4	24.4	29.8	23.5
Latin America and the Caribbean	...	73.7	80.8	85.0	89.7	91.6	6.5	6.3	5.5

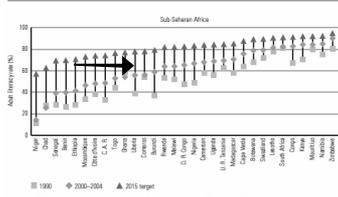
Source: Same as Table T.1



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Hence: the 'last mile' (or percentage points) of literacy improvement will be more difficult*

Figure 2.28: Estimated adult literacy rates (15+): 1990, 2000-2004 and 2015 target



*empirically, educationally, and...politically

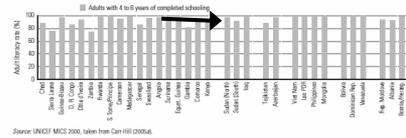
Source: GMR on Literacy

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The relationship between schooling and literacy is typically overestimated

Adults with (4-6 years) primary schooling are assumed to be literate



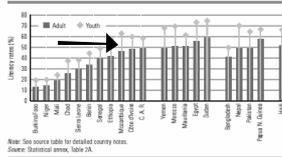
Source: GMR on Literacy

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Hence: Youth rates seriously overestimate rate increase, since quality of schooling has declined in poor areas

Figure 7.2: Youth and adult literacy rates for selected countries, 2000-2004



Youth: Age 15-24 years

Source: GMR on Literacy

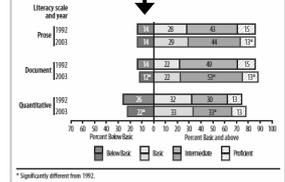
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View from the "industrialized world": Quite similar, parametrically speaking

- US has most recent major survey
- Compares 1993 US National Adult Literacy Survey with 2003 Survey (NAAL)
- Results
 - About 20% (40M adults) at "Below Basic" level in 2003
 - Additional 5% (11M adults) off scale (no English literacy)
 - Total 50M adults not functionally literate
 - Rate and total is unchanged in the decade from 1993 to 2003.

Figure 2. Percentage of adults in each literacy level: 1992 and 2003



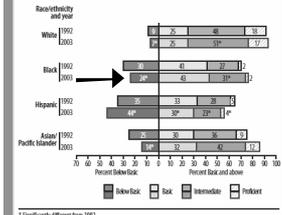
Source: US Dept of Education: NAAL, 2003/2005

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In the US (as globally): Race, ethnicity, language and social-economic class remain significant factors

Figure 8. Percentage of adults in each prose literacy level, by race/ethnicity: 1992 and 2003

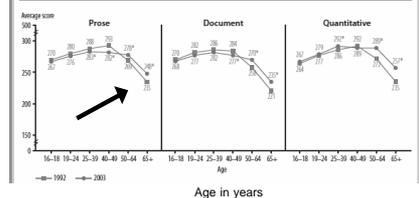


Source: US Dept of Education: NAAL, 2003/2005 11



In the US (as globally): Age is a significant factor (but decreasingly so)*

Figure 11. Average prose, document, and quantitative literacy scores of adults, by age: 1992 and 2003



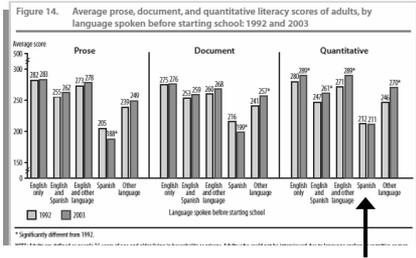
*Due to cohort changes (not cognitive limitations)

Source: US Dept of Education: NAAL, 2003/2005

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In the US (as globally): Mother tongue matters, but interacts with social-economic class

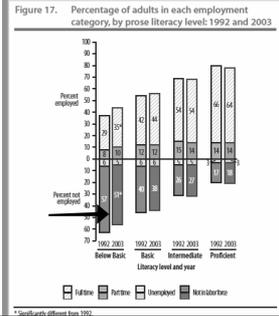


Source: US Dept of Education: NAAL, 2003/2005 15



In the US (as globally): Unemployment is related to low-literacy

***"Below Basic" persons are 3 times as likely to be unemployed



Source: US Dept of Education: NAAL, 2003/2005



The Future ... is still ahead of us (Yogi Berra)



The GMR helps lay out the issues very well, but provides only general (half-developed) solutions

1. Increase enrolments and quality of schooling
2. Scale up literacy for youth and adults
3. Invest in "literate environments"
4. More clout, more money

→ My three best guesses for adult literacy improvement, both in developing and industrialized countries...

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Future: Three decisive areas of focus for 2015 goals

1. Being literate vs. Becoming literate

- Nearly all research is correlational across countries (UNESCO, World Bank, OECD, etc.)
- Few within-country credible studies, and near-zero intervention or longitudinal studies
- We simply don't know what it takes to become literate in an out-of-school setting

2. International need for data vs. Local need for data

- International agencies are focused too much on the needs of global policy making
- Some discussion (little action) on Smaller-Quicker-Cheaper (SQC) assessments
- We don't need a statistical Mercedes-Benz when a VW will be satisfactory

3. Increased supply v.s. Increased demand

- How to increase sustainable demand (i.e. interest)?
- How to increase speed and quality of literacy learning?
- How to take advantage of science and technology?

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Some final thoughts on the next decade...

Main Challenge

Effectively reaching the unreached, unschooled, poorly schooled youth and adults

Main False Do-Good Step

Literacy, like HIV/AIDS, is not a charitable or easy-to-solve activity, but rather a difficult social and educational task

Main False Policy Step

Yes, increased resources are necessary, but the same-old same-old will lead to waste and loss of policy support

Key Opportunities and Key Words

Understand how people become literate in context, gather data that can hold programs accountable and increase quality, improve demand for literacy

Main necessity for "fresh hope"

New thinking and evidenced-based understanding, based on – but going beyond – the solid platform that the GMR on Literacy has provided.



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