

## BASIC EDUCATION: A CASE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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About one third of children in developing countries fail to complete the first four years of primary education, either because they drop out of school early, or because they have never set foot in a classroom. For many countries, therefore, development's most important building block-basic education-is not yet in place.

Since the "Education for All" movement was launched in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, numerous international conferences have underlined the pivotal role of education in development. There is now a widespread belief that putting people first-by investing in education and health-is the key to sustainable development and improved living standards. This was also stressed in the final declaration of the Social Summit in Copenhagen in March 1995. This document writes that education plays a central role in strategies that aim to do away with poverty, social exclusion and unemployment-the central issues of the summit. What is the power of basic education? There is strong evidence that:

1. Countries with high levels of basic education do better economically. Workers who have received some form of education perform more efficiently and generally perform work of higher quality.
2. (ii) Basic education reduces child mortality. Education helps spread knowledge about health care and nutrition, thereby enabling mothers to keep their families in better health. Studies indicate that each additional year of a mother's schooling translates into a 5 to 10 percent decline in child mortality.
3. Basic education helps slow down population growth, because education, especially for women, tends to raise the age of marriage (and thereby postpone child bearing), decrease the desired family size and boost family planning efforts.

While there is evident commitment and political will by governments to invest in basic education, the educational situation in the world is still rather bleak. There are 850 million illiterate adults in the world today, and the number is expected to grow to 881 million by the turn of the century. 130 million children have no school to go to and their number may grow to 144 million by the year 2000. Girls and women are particularly affected. Almost 30 percent of all women are illiterate, and 60 percent of all out-of-school children are girls.

Even in countries where literacy and schooling is almost universal, there are still pockets of the population that remain excluded, such as ethnic and religious minority groups, remote island and mountain populations, nomads, immigrants, refugees, the disabled and street and working children. The traditional response-expanding existing educational systems-fails to recognize that these groups are precisely those who find existing education systems unsuitable for their needs, their circumstances, aspirations and difficulties.

The problem of reaching the unreached will therefore not be solved by "more of the same". Effective and sometimes radical alternatives for specific groups should serve as an inspiration for educational planners responsible for planning large-scale national programmes in the future.

But when the great majority of children do enter school, the central problem is the poor quality and ill-adapted education offered-and high drop-out rate as a result. That is why education ministries in the next century will have to find ways and means to boost the internal efficiency of the school systems-reduce drop-out and repetition, improve teacher training and supervision, learning materials and schools facilities, and curriculum content.

In those countries which have already started to embark on large-scale reform, community involvement has been the key. Returning

ownership and control of education to the community naturally leads to a re-examination of content and process, and its relevance to employment, health, environment and other life skills, or for personal development. It also means that education systems are likely to support rather than undermine family responsibility for children.

By both conventional and unconventional methods, the commitment towards "Education for All" is being renewed. For, despite many competing priorities, awareness is growing that education is essential to combat the intertwined crises of poverty, unemployment and social disintegration. Only by investing in people can true social development come about.

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**AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO  
ENCOURAGING CREATIVE WRITING  
AND LITERACY APPRECIATION IN A  
SECOND LANGUAGE: THE FIJI WOMEN  
WRITERS GROUP.**

*Heather Lotherington-Woloszyn*

The Fiji Writers' Association (FWA) is an arts club which caters to writers living or working in Fiji. It was first established in the 1970s by a group of writers working at the University of the South Pacific in conjunction with other writers in Fiji with the aims of promoting creative writing and providing opportunities for local writers to publish their work. We write in English; an important second language in Fiji; the language of education beyond early primary school.

FWA readings have traditionally been held as pub readings, sprinkled sporadically throughout the year. The FWA readings are enjoyable evenings in which authors and readers read their own literature written in English in a relaxed environment where appreciation rather than criticism is invited. FWA pub readings have been popular and successful: closet writers have been inspired to read their works and people who would not normally have access to literary English have been introduced to literature in an anonymous, undemanding and nonacademic setting.

However, for many, a pub is an inaccessible or unattractive milieu. Further, the boisterous environment of a pub, which is excellent for encouraging the performance of humorous and entertaining pieces, is far less conducive to the reading of serious and sensitive literature. In response to this shortcoming in literacy reading opportunities, a group of women writers in Fiji has come up with an alternative meeting designed to attract and provide a forum for women writers in particular. The Fiji Women Writers have met for the past couple of years for casual evening get-together in private homes, where we have attempted to create an inviting and non-threatening environment in which women from all walks of life can participate, whether as readers or as listeners, in