

BECOMING LITERATE IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD

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Introduction

A milestone in the history of the International Reading Association occurred last year. In 1968, I attended the second World Congress of the International Reading Association (IRA) in Copenhagen and, in July of 1994, I went to the Twentieth Congress in Buenos Aires. For the first time on record, speakers of English were a minority, and 1800 speakers of other languages attended, mostly speakers of Spanish and Portuguese. The growth of the International Reading Association in Western and Eastern European countries in recent years has been remarkable, but the developments in Central and South America should be of particular interest to us in the South Pacific. They are at the borders of our South Pacific region. We have a representative from Argentina at our conference and perhaps we could encourage more colleagues from South America to join our future South Pacific Conferences.

Today we can make literacy contacts across countries, cultures and languages. We are more relaxed about sharing ideas across cultures and across languages. Hopefully we have become more respectful of differences in cultures, and differences in education. Without threat to our separate identities we meet here to share what we know.

The Third World Congress in Sydney in 1970 began our co-operative efforts in this region, and New Zealand induced some of the 'greats' to speak in Auckland on their way home. From that tentative beginning we have now arrived at our first conference in the heart of the South Pacific. Eve Malmquist, of Sweden, spoke in Sydney of world literacy issues, and they still demand our attention. I will start with some 'Global Issues', which are about books, and cultures.

Global issues

Strong education policies in the 1970's, which planned to increase the number of literate people in the world, were very successful and many people became literate. Severe budget cuts in the 1980's took us back several steps. In 1990 UNESCO called for renewed efforts for International Literacy Year and named this decade 'the decade of literacy learning'. There are many vigorous literacy campaigns around the world and so many good changes that it is hard to pick the winners for the literacy prizes given each year by UNESCO and the IRA.

UNESCO announced in 1990 that the number of people who could not read and write had gone down for the first time, suggesting that world literacy projects had had some effect. Many more people are literate, and many of these people speak, read and write in two languages. I want to acknowledge now how much bilingual and biliterate people can contribute to our understanding of multicultural perspectives.

Yet these efforts are not sufficient because by the year 2000, one in every five children in the world will still be living in a country where all children do not get to primary school, and in many places it will be the girls who do not go to school. These limitations occur because of funding, because of attitudes about who should go to school, and because of a gender issue which is also about ethnic and cultural beliefs.

Let me focus this topic by reading you a short account (edited) of one mother's achievements; a woman, in Burkina Faso, in Africa, where 50% of the children now go to school.

Catherine Bana is a farmer's wife in a village in Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries in the world. It comes 136th in the rankings just ahead of Ethiopia. For Catherine an ordinary day begins at 4 a.m. After doing the housework and feeding the children, chickens and animals, she fetches water and wood, and washes clothes. Then she prepares the household's staple food (a kind of porridge). She must also remember to grind some grain by hand or else to take some to the mill. The morning has already got very hot by the time

she begins her second work fatigue in the fields. Setting off with her youngest child strapped to her back, a *daba* or kind of hoe in one hand, a bowl of *to* in the other, a jug of water on her head and nothing to protect her feet... she will spend the whole afternoon tending the crops... walking considerable distances to fetch water and tirelessly scratching the parched soil...She returns home before nightfall, makes dinner, washes and tidies up, puts the children to bed and prepares the next day's meals... She works a good 16 hours every day of the week, is 27 years old, has six children and a life expectancy of 45 years.

But after giving birth to six children, at least she is still alive, as are her children. Three of them are already at school, and she herself has learned to read! (Adapted from a column by Roland-Pierre Paringaux, in the Guardian, 1989.)

Agencies from many nations have been working on health care, water supply, and nutrition in countries where the need is great, and often they work together across these problems. This is not enough. We need to get these agencies to put literacy programmes on their agendas also. No-one will deny the supply of emergency relief to countries in dire need, but the literacy theme of the Catherine Bana story should be prominent in our efforts to help build for the future, providing more and better schools in poorer countries. I have a more direct example of the benefit to health in the story of one mother from Ecuador.

Her two-year-old daughter, Berta, contracted a case of severe diarrhoea. The child became dehydrated and would have died if it were not for her mother's awareness of the symptoms. Berta's mother had taken a home course in basic health education offered by radio. She could follow the course because she could read and write. She had written down the steps of what to do to treat this problem during her course. She recognised the child's symptoms, retrieved her notes and followed what they said. Berta survived a nearly fatal bout with the illness and recovered fully, because of her mother's ability to listen, write and read. (Susan Glazer, President of the IRA, told this story at the World Congress in Buenos Aires last July.)

Now if two generations became literate at the same time, parents and children, this would lead to a double pay-off with effects that could spiral upwards out of the health area and into the work area. Slowly agencies have come to realise that when communities put effort into mothers' or fathers' education they need to direct effort, at the same time, to a child literacy push. The same programme will NOT suit the needs of both groups, but while mothers are learning to read and write and focussing on materials which improve their child care or their work, others in the community could be giving their children opportunities to learn through storytelling, story reading and 'exploring with a pencil'.

Briefly, let me examine three particular issues that range across many different countries and cultures.

Countries with not enough schools

Some countries do not have compulsory education, partly because there are not enough schools and teachers for all children to attend, like Hong Kong for example, and during the South African election news I heard the comment that despite the political changes, many children cannot go to school because there are not enough schools for them to go to. It is easier to provide teachers and schooling for one culture; it is much more complicated to provide good education for several cultures within one education system.

Countries at war

Countries at war, and those which have recently had enormous political changes, like Eastern Europe and South Africa, have much rebuilding to do in education in general and literacy teaching in particular. This UNICEF letter distributed in New Zealand before Christmas, 1992, captures the anguish of children in countries at war.

Ayann remembers vividly the night her parents died. With terror in her intense, dark eyes, the little seven-year-old Somali girl tells the story.

She was woken one night by shouting and gunfire. She heard her father yell and her mother scream. She stumbled through the dark toward the sounds. More shots rang out. Then there was silence. And Ayann could hear her little sister Idiil crying. Ayann found her sister hugging her mother who was lying dead on the ground. Their father's body lay nearby. The killers had fled into the night. Ayann and Idiil ran too. They didn't know where - they just wanted to get away from the once-happy home that had turned so suddenly into a scene from a nightmare.

Multiply that experience by millions and you have some idea of the effect of the wars across our globe on children - in Somalia, in former Yugoslavia, in Mozambique, and in perhaps 40 other wars now being fought somewhere in the world. If the children are not killed by bullets or bombs, they may die of disease or starvation, or the war may leave psychological damage that can never be undone.

It is my understanding, however, that in battle-scarred Northern Ireland good schools have been a haven of stability for children.

Many of these tragedies are brought about by intolerance of cultural beliefs or linguistic differences; by barriers to multiculturalism which are not easily overcome. Some of the solutions are beginning right now in today's schools where understanding of multiculturalism is being fostered.

Child labour

One article which haunts me was called 'Child Labor: The Plight of the World's Youngest Workers' published in Newsweek, January, 1983. It was an article about freeing boys and girls from labour and giving them access to school. A tangle of issues is involved here - no compulsory education, not enough schools and child labour issues.

In 1993 the International Labour Organisation featured the child labour crisis and estimated that 75 million children between 8 and 15 years work, not just in part-time assistance to families, but in the labour forces of their countries and

the United Nations suggested that the number is almost twice that. Child workers often labour under extremely hazardous conditions, handling poisonous chemicals, inhaling noxious fumes, hauling excessive weights, working in dark mines, or locked in brothels and threatened with AIDS. Children are usually overworked, underfed and underpaid - if they are paid at all. Many risk both their physical and mental well-being and surrender their childhood so that they and their families can survive. For example, Pedro, aged eight, is in charge of the pit pony in a South American mine where he works with his father and brother. The illiteracy link is clear. Child workers who cannot go to school are cohorts of potential adult illiterates, but if the children all came to school there would not yet be places for them. As fast as adult literates graduate from literacy projects, children with low-level literacy skills leave under-resourced school systems to fill their ranks - **in all the countries that I know**. The challenges are everywhere; they are global, and they occur in most countries, and cultural minority issues are frequently involved.

Literacy materials - The case of African Book Fair Trusts

I attended part of a symposium entitled 'Reading Is Development' at the African Centre in London in 1993. About 100 people were present, with Africans the majority. The organizing groups were the (well-established) Zimbabwe International Book Fair Trust (ZIBFT) and the African Book Publishers Network (APNET); the occasion was the launching of the South African Book Fair Trust. Speakers came from Somalia, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and South Africa. They represented writers, journalists, editors, novelists and poets, translators, librarians, philosophers, linguists, anthropologists and publishers' representatives. Men were in the majority, but impressive presentations were made by women writers and publishers.

A variety of literacy needs were identified: opinions expressed were individual and contradicted each other. Complaints were made. Innovations rarely used local knowledge as a starting point, books too often ignored what local people were already good at, or foreign literature was used which ignored the cultural wisdom relevant to local conditions. One author objected to being taught the old knowledge of his culture, the things he already knew, in the new language

of the school for as long as 10 years, and yet not being able to read about the latest developments in farming. Knowledge about day to day challenges is a priority: there is a huge demand for inexpensive manuals full of relevant information in countries with many new literates. **Relevance** of literacy learning and reading materials was stressed.

Indigenous publishers have problems with ministries who design language policies for a country, and different problems when there are no such policies. They cannot manage large publication runs, and Western publishers tend to get those contracts. Books are beginning to be published in indigenous languages for young children, but in many books the view is male and adult, and does not present a 'child world view'.

More positive changes were reported. Zimbabwe would bring down the tax on books to lower the costs of locally published books. A woman publisher from the Zimbabwe press spoke eloquently of the need to think about texts in a broad sense, producing ones which could be read, recited, dramatised, and told as stories for that is more 'African'. Africans need to write, and read, and re-invent their own stories, said another speaker.

The all-day seminar ended with several appropriate calls to action. There was a need to be creative by producing African books, and African stories, and enlarge African literacies. "But there is a larger literacy world", said another speaker, "and we want to read about 'them' as well as 'us'." Books must be a priority, and they do not need to be glossies. People must get together and demand books from governments, institutions, schools and communities. On the issue of costs and pricing they called for the exchange of 'a chicken for a book'. [An eight-year-old member of my audience suggested a revised slogan would be 'Look, a chook for a book'.]

I recently heard that the Australian writer of children's books, Mem Fox, is planning to return to Africa where she spent many of her childhood years, to work on a programme to help them produce more books for their children to read. That is where the emphasis is today, and where I think it ought to be.

Your South Pacific Literacy Education Newsletter (February, 1994) contained an article about first books for Classes 1 and 2 for reading to children, sharing

with children and for independent reading by children. A footnote said that 'the Vanua Books provide an excellent example of Pacific island book development and an excellent foundation for literacy, along with poetry, language-experience and the sharing of good books from other cultures'. Obviously the workshop I attended in London about countries in Africa echoed challenges about book materials which you are also solving here in the South Pacific.

Solving our problems in our own ways

Across the world, being literate depends a lot upon the demands of the society in which you are trying to exist. We judge 'who is illiterate' according to the society in which we live - getting along in daily living is a goal for some, other societies select 5, 8 or 12 years of schooling as acceptable markers of becoming literate. Countries like New Zealand now need every citizen to have high level literacy skills, and we do not yet achieve this.

The issues of the day from country to country may look similar but when we look more closely each country is different. What demands attention differs from country to country. A general concern for reading and writing standards across the world takes different forms in each country. New Zealand is sharpening up its practice in one area, USA in another, Canada or Scotland or England in yet others, so that the results of comparison studies provide no single set of information about how to go forward or how we might teach better, or what has to be done to get higher levels of literacy. Each country must work out for itself where the urgency lies, and what kind of change will be the best move towards a better education within its culture. There will be no common panaceas.

To me it makes sense for people to resist borrowing specific ideas from another country: common ground may be found in how to carry out the problem-solving, but each single country's multicultural mix will throw up specific challenges.

New Zealand

New Zealand's questions about literacy learning have for the past thirty years been on a different time cycle from those raised in USA. What do I mean by this statement? Since the 1960's New Zealand has taught young children to read using short stories or information books. The teacher helps children to read with understanding but she helps them in many different ways to learn how to use the texts to get to meaning. The Ministry of Education produced the reading materials after consulting with teachers. Contrary to arguments by New Zealand academics [Nicholson, and Tunmer] these practices did not evolve from the ideas of Ken and Yetta Goodman, Frank Smith,¹¹ or Marie Clay. The changes in New Zealand practice dated from about 1958 producing a new curriculum in 1963, nearly a decade before those authors published their major works or visited New Zealand as conference speakers: they were welcomed because aspects of their writings affirmed existing New Zealand practice. New Zealand's shift to storybooks evolved out of good practice under the scrutiny of school inspectors who gave guidance on how to teach well, in an early childhood programme steeped in the child-centredness of the British Infant School philosophies [Simpson, 1963]. Intentionally, the Department of Education left teachers free to make revisions and required them to search for improvements. Extremely professional guidance by the School Publications branch of the Education Department provided leadership and established quality standards. The new reading books relied on the frequency principle of natural language to provide the necessary repetition.

New Zealand avoided, rejected or resisted ideas from other countries. These included forms of 'phonics' instruction which distort the child's concept of what it is to read; all workbook-type exercises because these contain learning tasks of inferior quality and are not worth the paper they are written on; all basal reading books which do not allow enough flexibility for individual differences in complex learning such as reading; no competency tests of basic skills until several years into school and then schools could choose to use them or not; no whole class teaching since the emergence of dynamic grouping in the 1950's; and no detailed teachers' manuals - like a published prescription for the daily dose of literacy medicine - but instead a slip of a book only 60 pages long with recommended guidelines, and used by well-prepared teachers.

The Government produced the reading books and distributed them free to schools (UNESCO, 1984) involving authors in book production, and teachers in book development and trialing.

By the 1970's Don Holdaway (1979) was developing ideas about reading to children, shared books and guided reading, making this approach even more successful. He developed his approach for the specific purpose of improving the learning of Maori and Pacific Island children in inner city Auckland schools. Together with John Slane and John Penton he developed the ERIC teacher in-service course which was the forerunner of the ELIC course in Australia, and something like the South Pacific Literacy Education Course. We should learn from his approach to problem-solving; the content was right for New Zealand at that time.

My point is that since 1963 New Zealand mainstream literacy education has done its early literacy learning differently. It evolved from a critical appraisal of our own best practices and our own analyses of what we wanted in our education. We analysed our past efforts, took stock of current positions and plotted our own new directions.

One further inoculation and resistance to inappropriate practice dates from this era - we let the concept of learning disability float past us; but not without careful and critical analysis.

Two international surveys showed good results. The IEA survey of 1973 showed that New Zealand adolescents were reading well (Anderson et al. 1985; Guthrie 1981) and the IEA report in 1993 (Elley 1993, 1994) placed us among the top five countries, the first English-speaking country, with USA right on our heels. [Certain important literacy countries like Australia did not participate in the surveys.] There was no adverse consequence for 'doing it our way', but nor was there any outstanding gain!

As a result of the IEA research, New Zealand can now begin again to work harder on literacy learning. Our students may, on the average be good readers who develop high levels of literacy, but we have to ask **who are at the lowest? and why are they not learning as effectively?** We need to improve the literacy learning of our lowest achieving children. We must search for more

appropriate books and more appropriate programme emphasis to meet the needs of these children, among them the Pacific Island children who come to live in New Zealand.

The common ground is a good start

I am stressing the local nature of the solutions we need to design for each of our countries, taking our own cultural heritage into account. The thing that impresses me most from the latest IEA studies is that the relative competence for reading achievement which was described for the nine-year-olds from whichever country you select, is usually confirmed in the results for their fourteen-year-olds. The two are related. This seems to tell us clearly that it is important to invest in quality initial literacy instruction.

So let me look at 'The Early Years'. We now understand how parents and the community contribute to literacy learning before the child gets to school (McNaughton, in press). Under parents' care children learn to speak [of prime importance] and see some signs of literacy splashed across the environment or the TV screen, or in printed material. Fortunate children are exposed to storytelling, but only a small number in the global scene have stories read to them by the parents from beautiful story books, for most countries have no tradition of producing children's story books.

Literate parents write letters and messages and provide writing models for their children. They continue to amplify what schools can do for their children throughout the childhood years. Early in my research I discovered what many others already knew, that Pacific Island children in New Zealand were being introduced to literacy while their parents were in church. They also saw their families writing letters and receiving letters from relatives in the Pacific Islands. These are important acts of literacy, and children learn their first literacy concepts in such settings. Dr Stuart McNaughton is publishing a book about these early home literacies learned by children in many different Pacific Island homes in New Zealand.

'We should enlist the power-to-learn that children bring to school and let them relate what they already know to our

lessons. We should not destroy the wholeness of the real understanding that young children have about the world they live in by an unnecessary emphasis on detail, on correctness, on separate bits and pieces of knowledge and skill which they cannot relate to anything they already know.'

I agree with that quote from your SPLEC; I should agree, I wrote it in a talk I gave in Singapore in 1985.

Preschool children are already active learners. First, teachers in school must keep the learner active in the first years of school. It saves everyone else effort to have the learner pushing at the boundaries of his own knowledge. When you see a five-year-old who seems to be saying 'I can do this', education has been saved many problems.

We want the young child to have a sense of continuity as he passes from one kind of learning to another. He struggles to put together what he knows from the preschool years with what is going on in school, and if the change is too big he cannot make sense of the world, and his adjustment to school and to learning is much slower.

That reminds me of two things which a very important lady, Emilia Ferriero, from Argentina and Mexico, said recently. She said that we must remember that the child as the learner, is never part-way to anywhere. At any one moment what he knows works together as a whole, a totality. I think that adults find it difficult to understand that. They think of the child as half-way to somewhere. Instead his understanding comes from all his experience so far. How could it be otherwise, and we must understand it as the current pattern of his knowing.

Her second impressive statement made in Buenos Aires was this. Why do we always expect bilingual and trilingual children to reach comparable levels in their two or three languages? It is time, she said, that we began to be realistic: it is good to have several languages, but we should stop expecting learners to be equally good in both or all the languages they can speak. The real world allows us to operate on different levels in different languages; schools should not expect biliterates and bilinguals to perform equally well in both languages. That is a very freeing statement; it is so realistic. We want to give learners

opportunities to be bilingual and biliterate but we could accept different strengths in their speaking, reading and writing in each language.

The middle years of primary school

Time will not permit me to talk about high school students but I would be very happy to talk with any of you during the conference about that. Let me comment briefly about the middle years of primary school.

In some countries children enter a school where education proceeds in a new language, 'the language of instruction,' for example in New Zealand, in Singapore, and for many children in Fiji. The children may become bilingual, but their school learning is predominantly in the language of instruction.

In other countries educators have become convinced that there are advantages in learning to read and write the language you have learned in your home as a preschooler, and at some later time they are introduced to a second language of instruction. The children's schooling is not only bilingual but also biliterate; they are able to read and write in both languages.

When a transition to a second language of instruction occurs (after one, two, three, four or five years) then the primary school reader and writer is faced with many new challenges as he tries to learn about and in the second language. Warwick Elley is well-known in this part of the world for his research on how speaking, reading and writing development occurs in the middle years of primary school in South Pacific countries.

Perhaps the most important message that I take from discussion of this second language learning is this. Whenever the second language learning is introduced, children need rich opportunities for oral language learning. They can already read and write in their first language, so they have ideas about literacy and how it works which they can apply to this new language. There is some carryover, if the script and language forms are not too different. They do not have to learn the second language orally before they begin on second language literacy. There are distinct advantages in learning this second language to be learning to speak, and read and write all at the same time; learning in one activity can help

learning in the others.

There are always exceptions to guidance like this because languages are so different and the interaction between any two languages is very specific. So each country relies on its educational history and has to problem-solve this second phase of literacy learning, in a second language, for themselves. The debate is not just about getting a good education; it is about what is considered a good education by the communities being educated. Local problem-solving is necessary; the solution cannot be the same across the world. Two of the teasing questions are 'How much time should be given to continuing to read and write in the home language?' and 'How much effort should be directed to publications in that language?' The problems may be shared by many countries but there will need to be local answers.

Another common problem for this middle primary group is that they have to continue to read well texts that get harder and harder. To do this they must **continue to strengthen their literacy systems, in both languages**. It is as if we deal them two hands of cards and expect them to play expertly in two different card games.

It is easy to forget that learners need opportunities to do large amounts of **comfortable reading** in each language, reading with just enough challenge and whatever support that takes them to lift their achievement. Quantities of comfortable reading get the reading process going smoothly. If the texts are difficult then the teacher must introduce them in ways that make them comfortable reading!

We could think about a catch-up effort at about 10 or 11 years, when we look very carefully at a child's literacy progress in both his languages. This is a time to help learners strengthen particular aspects of their reading and writing to give them a flying start for high school. Intensive programmes could be delivered to small groups with particular reading or writing needs, as part of their language curriculum. What problems would be tackled? Some would focus on reading with understanding and involve much discussion; others who clearly dislike and avoid reading would be part of renewed efforts to interest them; or writing for different real-world purposes could be the focus of another group, while a competent group might be taught to be more flexible with texts

of various kinds switching across genres with ease.

You might say that all readers need all these things in their programmes so why not do a little bit of each? The aim of this approach for, say two terms of the school year, would be to deliver what is most needed by a particular learner [for they all have strong and weak points in both reading and writing, and in each of their languages]. I think we might strengthen all subsequent achievements, maximising the learner's opportunities in high school education. This age group can be made aware of many of the things that are helpful for them to know and do. Special assistance two years before the end of primary education would be a good time to pay attention to such things.

In many parts of the world children are kicked out of school after three or four years, before this special help could be given. Kick-out rates vary with country, gender, religion and many other things. Many, if not most, leave before high school. I will come back to that theme.

So what are the multicultural challenges?

I have a list of major challenges for multicultural literacy in the 1990's; they are not in any priority order but I will save my top priority until the end.

1. I think each education system should develop ways of problem-solving, to identify what is valuable in what they already do, and set priorities in what they want to achieve as the next big step forward. Problem-solving should precede changes in policy. Imported innovations should be viewed with deep distrust: the way forward is from what you already do well. Innovations imported from a country where the multicultural mix and history and community are very different may be an answer to a question which you do not have. Worse than that, an imported innovation may disturb the balance of what you already do well and hence the quality of what is currently achieved.

2. I favour a country having a language policy for education, something that will set goals for what happens to the home language, and to the common language of the community where that is different from the home language, and to the major language of education, commerce, justice and politics (Clay, 1992).

You cannot make quality decisions about the materials and resources that you need at each level of schooling until your language learning policy is clear.

3. I favour a survey of the literacy resources available - in homes, the schools, the community and in libraries - what is read and written, what stores of written wisdom are available in which languages? Where should new efforts be directed? What is urgent and relevant in book production policies?

4. I would invest in the early years of literacy learning in reading and in writing and plan any transition to a second language of instruction carefully.

5. An important 'must' in my list would be to ensure, as children move up through the primary and secondary school, that they get teachers who talk with them so that they understand the tasks of the school and the printed messages in books. There has to be a lot of talking to ensure that there is understanding, so that new words really do have new meanings. This calls for a lot more talking about the themes and texts in education to develop the reading competencies of the eight to twelve-year-olds with a lot of questioning, discussing and sharing of activities and solutions.

In particular, for children who are bilingual but being educated in English, teachers should ask 'What are we doing to ensure that they are understanding more and more English, and beginning to work with the multiple meanings of words that lie at the heart of understanding which English-speaking children catch in their ordinary life activities?' They may learn a reading and writing process in the early classes, but there is a whole language of books to be learned to make the most of education. How much attention do we give to whether what they read touches them enough to spur them on in a difficult task? I suspect new energy is needed here.

6. I know from reports on the development of the South Pacific Literacy Education Course that you already have excellent networks, discussion forums, evaluations and new practices available here in the Pacific, all of which has been carefully developed and expanded. There is no end to the problem-solving because every new gain reshuffles your priorities, and so you begin the problem-solving again in order to go forward. Necessary changes have to be drawn in to what is already good practice, avoiding pendulum swings of simple

packaged answers from abroad. It is important to remember that reading and writing are very important one to the other in first literacy learning, and speaking is of vital importance in second literacy learning.

Can we be sure that new teachers coming into education will continue this careful evolution of good practice? Just in the last two years a new movement has started up within the IRA in USA that might be an innovation to explore in our South Pacific countries. It is called Teachers As Readers. Groups of teachers come together to study and discuss - children's books, teachers' books, and new advocacies and articles. That seems like a grand range of activities for teachers to engage in.

School survival

Let me finish by looping back to where I began this talk and talk of my top priority for change globally, in rich and poor countries.

Literacy globally for all children (and future citizens) is threatened in many countries by the dropout rate in the first two years of school. Excessive school wastage manifests itself through high dropout and kickout rates so that out of 100 pupils starting school, only 60 reach the third year in some countries. That trend swells the numbers of adult illiterates in the population. No programme directed towards adults in developing countries will solve the adult illiteracy problem if the children who drop out of school continue to swell the ranks of illiterates from below.

I am not talking about getting tired of education after four years of school, or having to return to productive work in the fields for one's family after three or four years of success. I am talking about not knowing what in the world is going on around you in the first year of that strange place called school, of failing to engage with that world of print and literacy in the first year or two, of seeming to be a failure and of more use to the family out of school than being a failure in school, and of being allowed to escape early with little learning of a formal kind. Parents may value education but under harsh economic conditions they will not urge children who are making no progress at school to continue their schooling. They will let them leave school and help by

working in the community.

I am talking about young children in large numbers, taught by formal memorising methods, with few materials and little individual attention, who do not catch on to the game of learning in school. Reducing literacy problems depends on large numbers of children being successful in the first years of school, engaging with education and starting on a path of cumulative growth and learning.

When teaching conditions are difficult, absenteeism is not seen by the teacher as a problem. It was reported to me that the South Pacific Literacy Project teachers complained, mildly, that the new story reading emphasis had resulted in all the children coming to school with the result that the true numbers in classes were in the fifties compared with a much lower average attendance on the previous programme.

Improving school survival rates and reducing school wastage is an imperative. We must reduce the numbers of children we lose to illiteracy in the first two years of school because we are unable to give them the support that they need to build a reading and writing process. School survival rates must improve.

In industrialised countries we also lose our children in the first two years of school. We give most of our children a quality education. They work at reading books and producing their own stories, they learn how to extend their own learning, they are monitored carefully by teachers who challenge them to higher levels of competence and we foster creative thinking from the first days of school. That is what the employer will look for in his young worker who will adapt to new work roles with initiative. It is what is needed by the educated student who has to solve life's problems. We must not lose that creative tendency because of the ways in which we teach.

However, good schools lose some of their learners in those first years of school; and although we keep them captive through attendance laws, industrialised countries also have a school survival and school wastage problem for we lose children to successful education when they stumble in the early literacy programs of our schools. So that is where my top priority lies.

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