Short communication

What happened to literacy? Historical and conceptual perspectives on literacy in UNESCO[☆]

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ABSTRACT

For more than six decades, UNESCO has dedicated itself to be the international agency leader in literacy, even though other aspects of educational development have received greater attention and resources by the broader international community. Resources for UNESCO's literacy work have not increased, and its programmatic activities have been increasingly debated when seen in relationship to the scope of literacy challenges across the globe. Moving forward in a time of restricted budgets will require UNESCO to strengthen itself as a professional innovator and thought leader.

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At its founding in 1946, UNESCO put literacy at the top of its education and human rights agenda. More than six decades later, UNESCO maintains (on its website) the mission statement: "UNESCO is at the forefront of global literacy efforts and is dedicated to keeping literacy high on national, regional and international agendas." This paper briefly describes how UNESCO has sought to accomplish this mission, and its prospects for the future. With its claimed status as *the* leader in international literacy work, what UNESCO does, and does not, achieve will no doubt have an important impact on the future of literacy, especially in the low-income regions of the world that are dependent on external funding and technical assistance.

Literacy and UNESCO, 1946–2000. As part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1946, UNESCO put literacy, at its creation, at top of its education mission. In the decades that followed, the United Nations and UNESCO reiterated support for literacy in the 1975 Persepolis Declaration stating that: "Literacy is not an end in itself. It is a fundamental human right" (UNESCO (1975; cited in UNESCO, 2005, p. 136)); and the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All (EFA; Jomtien, Thailand) declared that "literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving as essential learning tools that comprise the basic learning needs of every person . . . child, youth and adult" (UNESCO, 1990). Later, the 1997 Hamburg Declaration held under Resolution 11 that: "Literacy, broadly conceived as the basic knowledge and skills needed by all in a rapidly changing world, is a fundamental human right" (UNESCO, 1997). Over its first 54 years, UNESCO affirmed and reaffirmed its leadership role in the "battle for literacy."

As is noted elsewhere (Burnett, this issue), UNESCO also drew the interest and attention of the international community through both technical and conceptual inputs. Over the years, UNESCO generally adopted a 'two roads' model of literacy: first, promoting children's access to school for basic education, and second, by fostering programs for adults (and out-of-school youth) in non-formal adult education programs. Operationally, and in terms of visibility, UNESCO made one of its first major technical impacts by responding to increasing demand for comparative data on literacy. By the mid-1950s, and in the decades that followed, UNESCO produced a wide variety of empirical reports on literacy rates, and these data formed the basis for other UN and bilateral agencies to report literacy levels and consider regional and national literacy priorities, especially in developing countries. To obtain its data, UNESCO initially depended on national education authorities to provide statistics on basic education and literacy, most of which were derived from school or program attendance records.

The first major UNESCO international report on literacy in UNESCO (1978) was based on the following: "In the projection exercise, school enrolment ratios for the 6–11 age group were utilized for estimating future illiteracy rates for the 15–19 age group, and these in turn, together with the United Nations demographic projections, were then utilized for estimating future illiteracy rates for the population aged 15 and over" (Smyth, 2005, p. 12). Furthermore, numerous countries gathered information via national censuses; but "at any given year during the 1980s and 1990s, up-to-date data would be available for only a limited number of countries; there would be some countries for which recent census data (less than five years old) were available, others for which the most recent data were 10, 15, 20 or more years old, and some (including most of the industrial countries) for which no data were available" (Smyth,

2005, p. 21). In other words, even though census data became available, it was almost always based on self-enumerated "illiteracy," with little or no information on language of literacy, and with about half the countries using data that were at least one or more decades out of date. Language of assessment and language of instruction clearly play a major role in determining not only the status of national literacy rates, but also the success of implementation (Robinson, 2005); these constraints in data collection have made both policy and implementation more difficult.

In the 1980s, the UN Statistical office began to commission household surveys of literacy that used direct skill measurement (Wagner and Srivastava, 1989). By the 1990s, national governments (Canada and the United States, as well as OECD, began a series of adult literacy surveys that started to replace UNESCO's data in industrialized countries. This was primarily due to increased sophistication of *direct* measurement of skills, an approach that was designed to help move beyond UNESCO's dependence on national *estimates* of literacy levels (Wagner, 1990). Later, when literacy was measured in censuses in developing countries, national authorities generally were satisfied with an individual's self-assessment response to such questions as: "Are you literate?" Yes or no. Questions about adult literacy were gathered by querying the head of household, while other assessments asked about educational levels or whether an individual had 'gone to school.' Some have suggested that such a movement towards multiple measures could be seen as an accomplishment of UNESCO, in that it moved beyond educational attainment by "facilitating the development of some limited set of operational definitions of literacy that enabled cross-national comparisons of literacy, even though questions remained about their reliability and validity" (Bevavot, personal communication, 2010). During this same period, the use of literacy statistics as part of the Human Development Index by UNDP, and as part of Unicef and World Bank development reports, put increasing pressure on UNESCO to provide reliable and comparable data on literacy, but little in the way of fiscal means was provided to do more than urge better approaches on its member states.[1]

During UNESCO's first half-century, there were also changes in the way it, and others, viewed literacy itself. These changes encompassed how literacy was defined – for example, as a cognitive and measurable skill (or skills) versus ways of 'understanding the world' (as in Paulo Freire's work on empowerment). During these years, UNESCO often found itself (as seen in its publications) adopting the exhortatory approach of literacy 'eradication' (of illiteracy as a disease), fighting the 'battle' against illiteracy, and literacy is like a 'light bulb' in that you are in the dark until liberated into the 'light' of literacy.[2] This metaphorical rhetoric dimension of literacy was not, however, the only way the literacy was promoted in UNESCO. During the 1960s, UNESCO (in partnership with UNDP) sponsored the Experimental World Literacy Program, which sought to foster 'functional literacy,' tied to jobs and economic growth UNESCO/UNDP (1976). The 1990 Jomtien EFA Conference put most effort into primary schooling, and, for the first time, focused major attention on the *quality* of learning in the classroom, a topic that would wait nearly two more decades before it would become a central UNESCO educational

concern. Yet, 1990 was also the UN International Literacy Year, where some progress was made in rethinking how UNESCO was going to foster literacy work in developing countries (Wagner, 1992). In the mid-1990s UNESCO began to engage in a number of applied research and development projects that were built on external partnerships with universities and NGOs.[3]

The first half-century of effort by UNESCO to keep literacy in the spotlight can be seen as the cup half-empty or half-full. On the one hand, UNESCO was practically the only international agency champion of literacy, at a time when other agencies were focused much more on other dimensions of the international education enterprise – for example, Unicef on young children and primary schooling, and the World Bank on the formal school system and higher education.[4] With respect to the World Bank, Jones (1997) emphasizes its insistence on a human capital approach, tied to formal education and the global economy. Literacy – especially adult literacy – was seen there as too political and insufficiently linked to direct economic development. Jones sums up World Bank specialists' hesitancy on literacy as follows: "The answer might rather lie in Bank preference for schooling and learning systems which are easily controlled and managed, easily integrated with the formation of a citizenry and workforce unlikely to upset any political or cultural applecarts" (p. 374). Only UNESCO kept a spotlight on literacy, but the intensity of the beam was limited by constraints on human and fiscal resources, and an uncertain uptake on new methods and concepts for literacy statistics and innovation. Yet, it seems that UNESCO never had sufficient fiscal or management resources to support its programs. This simple fact, and distinction, often led to confusion about UNESCO, which sought the of leadership manate without the means to control the outcomes of its approach. Further, UNESCO was constantly buffeted by its member states that pushed many education issues, not just literacy.

Literacy and UNESCO, EFA-Dakar up to 2010. In 2000, UNESCO and other agencies organized a second EFA conference in Dakar (Senegal), during which 164 countries agreed on the *Dakar Framework for Action,* including the goal to increase literacy levels worldwide by 50% in the year 2015.[5] This was also the occasion to take a new look at a number of key issues in literacy work, from definitions and measurement, to the role of mother-tongue education, the relationship between child and adult literacy, and new conceptualizations of literacy based on cultural variation (Wagner, 2000). Several years later, at the point when the United States (and some other nations) decided to rejoin UNESCO as member states, the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD; 2003–2012) was launched, with the U.S. First Lady (Laura Bush) named as its honorary spokesperson. The UNLD mandate would focus on "literacy for all [since it] is at the heart of basic education for all ... [and] creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child

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[1] See Smyth (2005) for a very useful review of the history of literacy data collection at UNESCO.

[2] For a review of UNESCO's changes in literacy conceptualization, see UNESCO (2005), p. 153. Its early approaches seemed in part due to the campaigns urged by Socialist countries, such as the former USSR, Nicaragua and Cuba, which promoted a more political than technocratic approach to literacy development (Wagner, 1986). Jones (1990, p. 46) summed up this approach more generally: "UNESCO was to be intergovernmental and functional, yet the rhetoric surrounding its program reflected the desire for high-level intellectual exchanges, focusing on moral issues and left untarnished by day-to-day political considerations."

[3] Significant among these initiatives was the 1994 establishment of the International Literacy Institute (ILI) at the University of Pennsylvania, initially co-funded by UNESCO. At its inception, ILI worked with the Literacy Section of UNESCO on a joint scope of work that covered training and professional development, innovation, regional and international conferences, and specific research projects, especially in the area of adult literacy assessment and monitoring; see the ILI website (www.literacy.org).

[4] And, there were several bilateral donor agencies (e.g., NORAD and SIDA), and NGOs (e.g., Action Aid) that kept pressure on UN agencies to take literacy seriously, and which supported or collaborated with UNESCO.

[5] It has been noted that this particular goal is mathematically impossible for countries with literacy rates above about 75%; a 50% increase would put them at *over* 100% literacy. Thus, this goal is usually interpreted as a 50% *reduction* of *illiteracy* levels across countries, which would mean that countries with a relatively high literacy rate, such as the U.S., would still be able to improve in the future. This mathematical error led to derisive comments about the organizers' limited *math* literacy skills.