



# Developing literate environments: Fleshing out the demand side of Education For All



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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of a literate environment as a framework for better recognizing and more fully specifying the demand side of Education For All – that is, the factors that determine the uses to which new literate, numerate and technical skills can in fact be beneficially put in any given context. Lessons from the history of literacy and experience from the assessment of nonformal education programs in Africa are used to suggest a perspective that balances the supply and demand sides of the issue and some of the policies and political conditions for achieving EFA under initially threadbare circumstances.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite palpable progress, the Education For All (EFA) movement remains well short of its goals, both at the front end and at the rear end. On the front end, the net intake ratio for children entering primary school in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, – or the proportion of appropriately aged children starting school as compared to the number in their entire demographic cohort – had by 2010 increased to a weighted average of 57% among countries for which the requisite data exist; and it had risen to 66% worldwide for low income countries reporting comparable results (UNESCO, 2012, 347). The overall net enrollment rates for those same two subsets of countries in the same year – i.e. the proportion of primary school age children in school once late arrivals have been included – stood at 78% and 82% respectively.

At the rear end of the system, the proportion of these young people who survive to the last year of primary school was estimated in 2009 at a weighted average of 62% among Sub-Saharan countries and 59% in the worldwide low income group (UNESCO, 2012, 384); and less than two-thirds of these managed to continue on to the junior secondary level. Wastage along the way has created a backlog of dropouts or “push-outs” about whom relatively little is known and who collectively constitute the hidden and neglected face of the EFA moon. As one consequence, overall adult literacy rates in Africa were estimated to average only 63% during the 2005–2010 period, with a 17 percentage point divergence between male and female rates, and they are forecast to increase only three percentage

points to 66% by 2015, the most recent deadline for achieving Education For All (UNESCO, 2012, 326).

There have been varying responses to these shortfalls. Some emphasize the need for increased funding or greater fidelity of donor countries to their stated commitments (Birdsall and Vaishnav, 2005; Gartner, 2009). Others dwell on ways to overcome relative omission of adolescents and adults from the initial focus of EFA (Archer, 2007; Oxenham, 2004). The most recent remedies place greater stress on improving educational quality and on the importance of both upgrading reading instruction in the early grades and better assessing the results as a means of ensuring that children who do complete initial schooling acquire the basic literate competencies that it is designed to convey (Gove and Cvelich, 2010; Wagner, 2011).

Arguably, though, these remedies deal with only one side of the issue—the supply side: that is, ways to improve or increase the provision of educational services. They largely neglect the demand side, constituted in good part by factors that determine the use to which literacy can be put in varying social milieus and that therefore influence the motivation devoted to acquiring it. As Torres (1994, 64–65) pointed out nearly two decades ago.

Literacy has been handled as an intra-educational issue, as a problem to be solved internally by the formal school system or the non-formal adult education program. While there is a tremendous need and significant room for improving the supply side (curriculum and pedagogy, teacher training and development, management and organization, teaching and learning conditions in the classroom), a number of studies have revealed extra-educational and demand factors as crucial to the acquisition, maintenance and effective use of literacy.

The existence or creation of a “literate environment” is key to any effective literacy strategy. Contrary to the popular claim,

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[its] creation... goes beyond distributing books or newspapers, equipping schools with textbooks and classroom libraries or preparing special post-literacy materials for neo-literate youth and adults. [It] means creating the necessary conditions to learn... and to use that knowledge appropriately... [and] meaningfully in everyday life.

For several years now important elements of this demand-side concern have been at least occasionally expressed and examined through the concept of a “literate environment” evoked in the Torres quote above, a term expressing the degree to which a given milieu is well stocked in reading materials or is more broadly characterized by a variety of opportunities and beneficial activities that both require literate and numerate skills and that put them to productive use. The notion crops up now and again in the EFA Global Monitoring Reports, associated UNESCO documents and the periodical literature, but is seldom defined with much precision or analyzed in much depth. The pages that follow are devoted to examining this hybrid notion, the experience that has given birth to it and its potential for highlighting and remedying weaknesses in the Education For All movement. The article is principally based on African examples and experience.

## 2. The nature of “literate environments”

The terms “literate environment” and “literacy environment” have come into increased usage over the last two decades to designate the characteristics of a setting – or of society at large – that support the acquisition, use and retention of literate and numerate skills. A “literate environment” is thus one that offers a *sufficient density of easily accessible and relevant reading materials and a sufficient frequency of opportunities to apply literate or numerate competency to personal and social benefit* so that learners are both motivated to master the art and more likely to maintain and increase their skill level over time.<sup>1</sup> “Literacy environment,” on the other hand, is a more neutral and generic term for the nature of those surroundings, whether or not they are particularly supportive of learning and literacy retention.

Two distinct and overlapping arenas of application for these ideas are the most common: first, school settings, where the concern is to highlight the importance of surrounding children with resources and stimuli that support the acquisition and use of “the three R’s” (e.g., Barody and Diamond, 2012; Hart et al., 2009); and, second, the broader contexts of adult and nonformal education, where the focus typically expands to include not just the provision and availability of reading materials once the particular cycle of organized learning is completed but also factors in the larger environment that affect provision of reading resources and determine the level of opportunity to put new literate or numerate skills to economically and socially beneficial use (e.g. Dave et al., 1989; Author, 2010).

Because basic education has become nearly universal in industrialized countries and written media are widely available there – notwithstanding persistent pockets of need as well as manifest inequities in access to higher education and to opportunities for lifelong learning – the existence of a literate environment in societies of the North is, rightly or wrongly, taken as a given for most purposes. Related attention in the industrialized world therefore focuses principally on the supply side of the question and particularly on improving childhood classroom and

home environments so that young people are more effectively surrounded by stimuli, opportunities and quality materials for developing reading, writing and mathematical skills and so more effectively prepared to confront an adult world and job market that are assumed to demand and reward a high level of literacy (e.g. Hawken et al., 2005; Mayo and Elbers, 2012). A good deal has been made in this regard both of the lack of such contextual supports in the less well-endowed schools of rich countries and, particularly, of the radical disparity between the quality of literacy environments in the homes of lower income families and the nature of those in middle or upper class households (Neuman and Celano, 2001). The former are typically characterized by limited availability of reading materials and few adults who make use of them, whereas the latter often provide not only a much richer palette of books, publications and (now) electronic media but two other critical resources as well: first, reading materials that are better adapted to childhood interests and needs; and, second, adult role models more ready and able to help children with this dimension of learning.

In less industrialized and developing areas of the world, on the other hand, one cannot as easily assume either that the density of presently available uses for literate and numerate skills is sufficient to sustain demand beyond the minority of the population with access to jobs in the formal labor market – or that current provision of electronic media, publications and even textbooks is ample enough “at ground level” (and particularly in the rural and depressed urban areas that EFA advocates hope to reach) to furnish adequate grist for learning. The advent and rapid spread of internet, cellphones and other new modalities of electronic communication have modified the supply side of this picture in important ways to be considered shortly, but they have not yet fundamentally changed the disequilibria in access or supply between industrialized and developing regions and between rural and urban areas. Internet World Stats estimates the internet penetration rate for Africa as a whole at 15.6% in 2012, less than half of the world rate of 37.7% and of course far below comparable rates for North America (78.6%) and the European Union (73.0%) (Internet World Stats, 2012).

Under these circumstances, one is obliged to assess the state of the literacy environment rather than simply to *assume* it – and to come up with strategies for upgrading these background characteristics in tandem with efforts to improve the instructional ones. It is an activity that does not come very naturally to educators, due to the prevalence of what Street (1995) has called “the autonomous model of literacy”: that is, the firmly held conviction that literacy is its own reward for being, an art whose mastery confers major benefits *ipso facto* and regardless of contextual conditions. Believers in that creed, perhaps born in part from historical Western (and Islamic) experience with dissemination of the Holy Writ and from persuasions about its unilateral potency, may see little need to dissect the anatomy of literate environments.

## 3. Restoring the demand side

Underlying this debate lie, as suggested, both a fundamental contrast and a potential complementarity between the supply and demand sides of the issue (Author, 2010). The former refers, of course, to legitimate concerns with providing books, newspapers and other print or electronic media to present and potential learners. These must certainly be major educational objectives in any setting, and particularly in those where related resources are so thin on the ground. Demand-side phenomena, the flip side of the coin, have to do with factors that stimulate increased interest in and increased procurement of educational goods or services. They may thus concern two kinds of activity: first, subsidies to

<sup>1</sup> The theme of the 2012 EFA Global Monitoring Report, “Youth and skills: Putting education to work,” thankfully begins to redirect attention to the demand and post-schooling part of the picture, with, however, rather little examination of the factors that determine whether and to what extent there are in fact opportunities and employments in the environment that put new skills to productive and satisfying use (UNESCO, 2012).

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