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Literacy and Lifelong Learning : The Linkages

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*by Rosa Maria Torres*

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**Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA)**

International Institute for Educational Planning

7-9 rue Eugène Delacroix

75116 Paris, France

Tel.: +33(0)1 45 03 77 57

Fax: +33(0)1 45 03 39 65

adea@iiep.unesco.org

**web site: [www.ADEAnet.org](http://www.ADEAnet.org)**

# LITERACY AND LIFELONG LEARNING: THE LINKAGES

Rosa María Torres <sup>1</sup>

Instituto Fronesis

<http://www.fronesis.org>

## I. Introduction

1. Many people would think that the notions of *literacy* and *lifelong learning* have nothing in common. In fact, most people – including many policy makers and education specialists - think of *literacy* as a short, remedial, non-formal educational provision for poor youth and adults who did not go to school when they were children. This paper attempts to deal with these and other misconceptions about literacy, and show the intimate relationship between literacy and lifelong learning.

2. Youth and adult literacy have been neglected over the past two decades within national and international agendas. In practice, the Education for All goals (Jomtien 1990 and Dakar 2000) prioritized children and primary education. The Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) do not even include adults and their basic learning needs.

3. Recommendations against investing in adult literacy and adult education in general, promoted by the World Bank since the late 1980s vis a vis developing countries, were based on two grounds: (a) scarce resources and need to prioritize children's education and primary school, and (b) low cost-effectiveness of adult literacy programmes.<sup>2</sup> Neither of these arguments are valid: (a) because children's education and adult education are intimately related and thus cannot be viewed as an either-or option, and (b) because the low cost-effectiveness argument was not based on sound evidence and knowledge of the field, and has been rectified in recent years by the World Bank (Lauglo 2001, Oxenham and Aoki 2001, Torres 2004).<sup>3</sup>

4. The goal is not "eradicating illiteracy" (teaching everyone to read and write) but to ensure *universal access to the written culture* (literacy plus effective access to, and use of, reading and writing in all its forms). Literacy is just a means to reach that objective. Ensuring *literate families*, *literate communities* and *literate societies* implies working simultaneously on four complementary fronts:

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<sup>1</sup> Rosa-María Torres. Ecuador. Educationist and linguist. Pedagogical Director of the National Literacy Campaign "Monsignor Leonidas Proaño" in Ecuador (1988-1990) and Minister of Education and Cultures (2003). At UNESCO's request, she drafted the Base Document for the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012), "*Literacy for All*." Director of Instituto Fronesis <http://www.fronesis.org>

<sup>2</sup> Both arguments can be found in World Bank's 1995 education policy document, *Priorities and Strategies for Education*. The low cost-effectiveness argument was based on one single study (Abadzi 1994) commissioned by the WB, and the data used referred to the findings of the the Experimental World Literacy Programme implemented in the late 60s (between 1967 and 1972) in 11 countries (see Lind and Johnston 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Now, on the contrary, some WB-supported studies (see for example Carr-Hill 2001, conducted in Uganda) conclude that adult (out-of-school) education may be more cost-effective than primary (school) education. This is a tricky argument, that may lead to see adult and non-formal education as a substitute for children's schooling.

- (a) universal quality basic education for all children, placing literacy (acquisition, development and use) at the heart of school efforts and reforms;
- (b) literacy for all youth and adults excluded from the school system, not only through specific programmes for adults but also as part of family and community education efforts, and through all possible means;
- (c) a literate environment and a literate culture at local and national level, stimulating not only reading but also writing, and engaging all related institutions, means and technologies (e.g. libraries, schools, newspapers, radio, TV, digital technologies, etc.); and
- (d) dealing with poverty in a structural manner, not only through *ad-hoc* focalized interventions but mainly through profound changes in the political, economic and social model that sustain poverty and inequality. There is no way to eliminate illiteracy without eliminating poverty, ensuring equity and promoting national human and economic development.<sup>4</sup>

In other words: literacy for all and education for all require complex interventions and transectoral policies. Education policies must be intertwined with economic, social and cultural policies.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning (LLL) means literally “learning throughout life”. This is what we all do, regardless of who we are, where we live and whether we go to school or not. Thus, in a sense, there is nothing new about LLL. However, the current adoption and revival of LLL as a paradigm for education systems worldwide implies the recognition that:

- (a) it is *learning* that matters (not information, education or training per se),
- (b) the *information* society and the *knowledge* society that are emerging imply fundamentally the building of *learning societies* and *learning communities*;
- (c) continuous learning is today essential for survival and for enhancing people’s quality of life, as well as for national human, social and economic development;
- (d) there are many learning systems, places, means, modalities and styles;
- (d) it is necessary to ensure learning opportunities for all, throughout life.

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<sup>4</sup> This fourth strategy is an essential requisite, and yet it is not mentioned in the 2006 *Education for All Monitoring Report* “Literacy for Life”, devoted to literacy. See UNESCO’S portal [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=43009&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=43009&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

<sup>5</sup> See: Torres, Rosa María, “*Justicia educativa y justicia económica: 12 tesis para el cambio educativo*” (“Education Justice and Economic Justice: 12 Theses for Educational Change”), Movimiento Internacional Fe y Alegría/Entreculturas, Madrid, 2005. See <http://www.fronesis.org/libreriarmt.htm>

### **III. Literacy and lifelong learning**

#### **1. Literacy is an ageless concept**

The term *literacy* refers essentially to the ability to read and write (numeracy is often added as a complement or a component of literacy). Although the term *illiteracy* and *literacy* have traditionally been coined to refer to the population aged 15 years old or older, learning to read and write is in fact an ageless concept and an ageless learning process. It applies to children, youth and adults.

Social convention sees childhood as the “normal” age to become literate. People are supposed to learn to read and write during their “school-age” period. Such social convention is based on two false assumptions: (a) societies that effectively ensure children’s universal right to go to school and (b) schools that ensure the right to learn. False assumptions because this is not the case in most countries in the South and in many countries in the North. Millions of children do not have access to school, or to a school that ensures the right to learn, or do not have the conditions to remain in school long enough to acquire solid reading and writing skills. Thus, millions of children, youth and adults are forced to learn to read and write out of the school system, when they are young or adults, through formal or non-formal “second chance” education options.

“School age” is not equivalent to “learning age”. Moreover, in the framework of LLL, notions such as “late entry” to school or “over age”, which use age as a discriminatory factor, must be revised. Given the objective economic, social and educational conditions offered to the population, education and learning systems must assume lifelong learning as an inevitable reality, be open and flexible to accommodate the literacy needs of learners at any age.

#### **2. Literacy acquisition and development take place in and out of school**

It is commonly believed that people start to learn to read and write when they enter school or pre-primary school, and that such process ends with the last day of school. That belief is the result of lack of knowledge and prejudice. Abundant theoretical and empirical research informs us that:

##### **(a) The basis for literacy acquisition is rooted in early childhood**

Understanding the nature and role of the written language is a process that begins well before reaching “school age” and going to school. At a very young age (2-3 years old), alongside with the development of oral language, children start building hypotheses about the written language and its social uses, by seeing or listening to writing and/or reading acts and materials around them (at home, in the street, on the radio, on television, etc). By the time children get to school, they have already strong ideas – many of them sound and valid - of what reading and writing in their own language(s) are about. This occurs not only with children coming from privileged families but also with children coming from poor families and poor literate contexts. Evidently, the

context and stimuli determine important differences in children's early introduction to literacy.<sup>6</sup>

The school system does not build on the previous knowledge children bring to school but ignores and despises it (the same is true vis a vis adult learners, although the need to respect and start from previous knowledge is much more emphasized in adult education than in child education). Longitudinal studies on child literacy acquisition processes, starting at home and continuing in school, reveal that the school often contributes to stop children's curiosity about language and their spontaneous desire to learn to read and write. Becoming literate turns out to be a difficult and painful experience for millions of children worldwide, a learning process that could be facilitated if policy makers, school administrators and teachers were more knowledgeable about literacy acquisition and about the home-school learning transition. It is not only teachers that must be better trained in these issues, but also policy-makers and administrators.

#### (b) Literacy development goes far beyond the school system

Traditionally, the world of education has associated literacy with schooling, and improving literacy with teacher training and school reform. However, being able to read and write with understanding, for self expression, information, communication and learning purposes, implies much more than going to school and having motivated teachers. Out of school factors are just as important as school factors for literacy development, facilitating or inhibiting learners' desire and capacity to learn to read and write and to use the written language meaningfully in daily life. Economic, social, cultural and linguistic policies must converge if the target is a literate nation.

The family and the local community have a critical role in making literacy accessible, necessary, and enjoyable, not only in early childhood but throughout life. Access to cultural activities, to a sport yard, to a library, a museum, a reading center, a cyber cafe, newspapers and mass media, etc, complements school life, enhances a literate and a learning environment for all, and can make an important difference in a person's life and in the life and future of a whole community.

Many such resources exist today in poor urban and rural areas, but they are not used properly, in a planned, coordinated and intersectoral manner, for the benefit of all. The school library is meant only for school students. The computers, if available, are placed in the school and remain locked, instead of being placed in a multipurpose community reading and learning center, well served and well kept. Adult literacy classes are often held under a tree while the school building or the local church remain underutilized. Newspapers hardly ever trespass school buildings, even when there are no textbooks or no interesting materials to stimulate students' reading. And so on.

#### (c) The school system does not guarantee literacy acquisition

Illiteracy is generally associated with lack of access to school and continues in fact to be identified with the out-of-school population. However, this is not necessarily the case. Today illiteracy is also related to access to poor quality formal and non-formal education. Abundant studies, statistics, and tests confirm over and over again that the

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<sup>6</sup> See for example the rich theoretical and empirical research conducted by Emilia Ferreiro in the Latin American region, as well as comparative studies with other countries and regions.

school system is doing a poor job vis a vis literacy education, from pre-school to higher education.

Literacy remains the most important mission delegated by societies to school systems. This mission is in crisis and under heavy scrutiny. Not only in the South but also in the North, reading and writing results from (both public and private) schools have become a major national issue. National and international tests, most of which place a special emphasis on literacy skills, show consistently much lower reading and writing results than those expected in each specific country. So-called “developing countries” occupy regularly the last places in such international tests, when compared to “developed countries”.<sup>7</sup>

Although usually labeled as “learning problems”, the main problem lies evidently on the teaching side and on the conventional school structure and culture. While everything suggests that major changes are needed in the teaching of reading and writing in schools, it is also clear that schools and teachers need to be supported in their literacy mission with integral and sustained family, community and societal strategies.

### **3. Literacy is a transgenerational issue**

There is plenty of evidence showing that parents’ – and especially mothers’ – education has an important impact on children’s lives in terms of health, nutrition, child care, protection, school attendance, etc. Adult and parental literacy are tightly linked to children’s literacy. In all regions and across countries and cultures, illiterate women acknowledge that one of their strongest motivations to learn to read and write revolves around the school and their children’s education: help them with school homework, feel more confident to approach the school, attend school meetings and speak with their teachers. So important is parental education for children’s wellbeing, that – as we have argued elsewhere – children’s right to basic education should include the right to educated parents.<sup>8</sup>

Family literacy programmes in developed countries stimulate parents to read to their children every night before they go to bed, something that millions of parents in developing countries cannot afford to do, because they do not know how to read, because they have nothing to read to their children or simply because they have no time to do it.

Based more on prejudice than on consistent data, parental illiteracy has come to be considered a predictor of children’s school failure. In the framework of modern competition schemes between schools for students’ academic results, associated to

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<sup>7</sup> This is the case, for example, of OECD’s PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), administered to 15-year-olds in schools. PISA measures reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, and problem solving (applied to real situations). The survey was implemented in 43 countries in 2000 and in 41 countries in 2003. See <http://www.pisa.oecd.org/> Also in the IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey) applied in 2001, results in participating developing countries – such as Chile – were devastating. See IALS: <http://www.statcan.ca:8096/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=89-588-X>

<sup>8</sup> Torres, Rosa María, “Children’s right to basic education”, in: *Education News*, Nº 14, UNICEF, New York, 1995. See [http://www.fronesis.org/rmt\\_textos.htm](http://www.fronesis.org/rmt_textos.htm)

incentives for teacher or school performance, a predictable situation is emerging and widespread: public schools – not only private ones - selecting students so as to ensure high school rates.<sup>9</sup> Extreme poverty and parental illiteracy are a red light for school principals. There is also evidence that school repetition, a decision to a great extent taken by every teacher and on unclear grounds, is often related to prejudice against poverty, racial status, and parental illiteracy.<sup>10</sup>

The transgenerational impact of literacy is also true in the relationship between teachers and students. Teachers who do not have reading habits and who do not enjoy reading and writing, cannot teach their students what they do not have. Policies addressed to teachers' own literacy development - such as availability of teacher rooms in schools, distribution of free newspapers to schools, books and computers for teachers at low cost, digital literacy, etc – are critical to transform schools into reading institutions and to enhance the school literate environment.

#### **4. Literacy is a solid foundation for lifelong learning**

Not all knowledge and learning depend on being able to read and write. In fact, a large portion of the information and knowledge that are essential for life and for cultural reaffirmation and renewal, are learned without any education, and often transmitted orally from one generation to another. That is why it is wrong to assume that the illiterate are ignorant.

Nevertheless, the written language has a central role in schooling, in the building and transmission of knowledge, and in lifelong learning. The written language continues to be the most important means for the preservation and transmission of knowledge. Despite the unprecedented expansion of the audiovisual culture, reading and writing remain at the core of information and communication media such as radio, television, film, or video. Digital technologies require proficient readers and writers. Combatting the digital divide, by democratizing the access to and use of computers and other modern information and communication technologies (ICTs), implies thus a huge literacy effort worldwide.

Literacy is the entry point to basic education and the most important passport to lifelong learning. Being able to read and write marks a before and an after in people's lives. Becoming literate is often associated with notions such as “light”, “window” or “door” by adult learners. Reading and writing accompany people throughout life and enable them to keep informed and intellectually active.

#### **5. Literacy is essential for human development and for improving people's quality of life**

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<sup>9</sup> In the Latin American context, Chile has the oldest system to evaluate school achievement, competition between schools and incentives associated to such achievement and competition. The situation of public school principals not accepting students coming from very poor backgrounds and/or having illiterate parents, has triggered alarm in the past few years. The same situation is currently expanding to other countries in the region that share this type of policies, often following World Bank recommendations.

<sup>10</sup> See: IBE-UNESCO/UNICEF, *School Repetition: A Global Perspective*, Geneva, 1996.

*“Human development is about much more than the rise or fall of national incomes. It is about creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests. People are the real wealth of nations. Development is thus about expanding the choices people have to lead lives that they value. And it is thus much more than economic growth, which is only a means – if a very important one – of enlarging people’s choices. Fundamental to enlarging these choices is building human capabilities – the range of things that people can do or be in life. The most basic capabilities for human development are to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living, and to be able to participate in the life of the community. Without these, many choices are simply not available, and many opportunities in life remain inaccessible”.* (UNDP 2001:9)<sup>11</sup>

In recent years, literacy has been framed in the economic logic that dominates the world and the education field in particular. Internationally, current dominant trends link adult literacy to “livelihoods” (Oxenham *et.al.* 2002 ), to “poverty alleviation” amongst the extremely poor, and as a preventive strategy to “prevent children’s failure in school” – as if failure were a fatal destiny for the poor.

However, it is not realistic to attribute literacy *per se* the capacity to change people’s lives, by impacting significantly on their income, employment, or poverty. Today, basic literacy does not make a difference between getting or not getting a job, much less getting a good job. Unemployment is high and on the rise worldwide, especially in the South. Millions of high school graduates and professionals are unemployed, and millions migrate to the North in search of better life conditions. According to ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), the possibility to break the cycle of poverty implies today in this region at least twelve years of schooling.<sup>12</sup>

And yet, being able to read and write improves the quality of life of people in many and most profound ways, not necessarily economic in nature. As has been traditionally acknowledged, literacy is related to human dignity, self-esteem, liberty, identity, autonomy, critical thinking, knowledge, creativity, participation, empowerment, social awareness and social transformation, all of them important human satisfactors, beyond material conditions.

Adult and third age learners often refer to reading and writing as “a companion”, “a weapon to fight loneliness”, “a means to travel without traveling”. Substituting the fingerprint with the writing of one’s own name is the most important act of dignity for an illiterate person, affected by shame and low self-esteem.

Literacy is also related to mental and psychological health. Available neuropsychological research suggests that people who cultivate an active and complex mind throughout life – very much linked to reading and writing, as opposed for example to the much more passive activity of watching television – age well and are less exposed to diseases such as Alzheimer and dementia.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://hdr.undp.org/hd/>

<sup>12</sup> See ECLAC/CEPAL 2000 <http://www.eclac.cl>

<sup>13</sup> In a comparative study between literate and illiterate elders in the Northern Manhattan community, illiterates obtained lower scores than literates on measures of naming, comprehension, verbal abstraction,

Measuring the personal, family and social impact of literacy in terms of improving people's quality of life, implies going beyond narrow economic frameworks and indicators, identifying and creating new, more integral and qualitative indicators.

## **6. Literacy is a lifelong learning process**

For decades, people have associated literacy acquisition with a short period of time - a few years of schooling in the case of children, a short literacy programme or campaign in the case of youth and adults. The idea that functional literacy requires four years of schooling, attributed to UNESCO, has been quoted and adopted by national and international policies worldwide. In fact, it was adopted in 2000 by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): completion of primary education by the year 2015 is understood as "reaching grade five", an extremely modest goal, in many cases below the educational levels already achieved in many countries in the South.

Accumulated experience worldwide shows that one-time, short adult literacy interventions without immediate and sustained follow-up -- whether campaigns or programmes -- leave generations of "literacy graduates" that are unable to read and write in daily life and that soon "relapse" into illiteracy. Even four years of schooling, for children, youth or adults, is insufficient for ensuring sustainable literacy and basic education. A recent regional study on functional literacy conducted by the UNESCO Office in Latin America in seven countries in the region (Infante 2000) concluded that at least 6 or 7 years of schooling are required to deal meaningfully with reading and writing, and 12 years to fully master them, but only if they are used both within and outside the school, in different contexts such as home, work, social relations, etc. In other words: meaningful literacy acquisition depends not only on reaching a certain education level but, most importantly, on effective use of reading and writing.

Thus the need to plan literacy, "post-literacy" and basic education together, as a continuum; to offer in every programme not only materials to learn to read but also materials to read; and to articulate literacy policies and programmes with policies and programmes to enhance reading and writing, to make effective use of libraries, community reading centers, etc.

The accelerated expansion of schooling in the past thirty years in the South has expanded literacy and the literate population, especially among the younger generations. On the other hand, the accelerated expansion of modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) - computers, cellular phones, and other modern devices -- since the 1990s, has further enhanced and diversified the need and the practice of reading and writing for millions of people, especially for youth. As a result, the definitions, needs, competencies and uses of literacy have become wider and increasingly complex, including "digital literacy."

In today's world, being able to read and write with understanding is not enough. Being able to use reading and writing productively, for personal and social purposes, is not

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orientation, and figure matching and recognition. See "Effect of literacy on neuropsychological test performance in nondemented, education-matched elders", in *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society* (1999), 5: 191-202 Cambridge University Press.

enough. Children, youth and adults must learn to manage information and knowledge in a critical and reasonable manner, learn to search, identify, evaluate, select, and use information and knowledge wherever they are available: print, mass media, or the Internet.<sup>14</sup> Developing critical readers -- of the word and of the world, as Paulo Freire used to say -- has been at the core of progressive school curricula and adult literacy campaigns and programmes throughout the world. Today, critical thinking, reading and writing are more important than ever, given the unprecedented expansion of information and knowledge, and the diversification of means and channels that characterize the so-called Information Society. These competencies go far beyond literacy development; they are part of the mission of basic education and citizen education, and are developed throughout life, in the family and in the community, at work, through social awareness and civic participation.

In other words, becoming literate can no longer be viewed as a specific and terminal period in the life of a person, whether children, youth or adults, but rather as a lifelong learning process in itself. Between being illiterate and being literate there are multiple degrees and levels of mastery of the written language. Terms such as “basic literacy”, “initial literacy”, “functional literacy”, “functional illiteracy”, “neoliterates”, “post-literacy”, etc, express in a way the need to go beyond the usual simplistic illiterate/literate dichotomy and to acknowledge the linkages between literacy and lifelong learning.

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<sup>14</sup> Some communities linked to ICTs, especially librarians, are using the term “information literacy” or “informational literacy” to refer to this set of competencies. An “information literate person” is defined as someone who “can recognize when information is needed and has the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information effectively”. See American Library Association <http://cybrary.uwinnipeg.ca/about/accessservices/il/standards.cfm>

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