

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY

The politics of mass literacy: Where we stand



MANZOOR AHMED

On the occasion of International Literacy Day, proclaimed by the United Nations in 1966, there will be pronouncements with much fanfare about the vital role of literacy in national development and the

progress that has been made. Meanwhile, Unesco has been reporting since the 1990s that about 780 million adults in the world remain non-literate—any progress made since then is apparently offset by population growth.

The Bangladesh government reported a precise adult literacy rate of 74.7 percent in 2019. Educationists remain sceptical about the real numbers of adults and youth in Bangladesh—as well as in the world—who have the functional and sustainable literacy skills that make a difference in their lives. The effort and the goal of meaningful mass literacy appear to remain mired in shaky political commitments and the consequent policy and programmes that cannot succeed.

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and author of the *“Pedagogy of the Oppressed,”* said that literacy should enable learners to read the world, not just the word. Freire spent most of his life in exile from Brazil because of his advocacy for “conscientisation” of the literacy learner. The literacy managers of the world have remained focused on the “word”—the mechanics of decoding the alphabet—and they count literacy results accordingly. This mechanical approach does not motivate and inspire the learners—children or adults.

At Unesco’s birth after the Second World War, its very first general conference, held in 1946, discussed the idea of education as the means to fight poverty and promote well-being of people. In 1947, an ambitious literacy programme titled “Fundamental Education” was announced as a necessary precondition for the maintenance of international peace and the growth of economic prosperity. The history of how this innocuous initiative became caught in Cold War diplomacy and failed to achieve its mission has come to light in part on the basis of declassified US Department of State records [Charles Dorn and Kristen Ghodsee (2012). “The Cold War Politicization of Literacy: Communism, UNESCO, and the World Bank”].

Unesco stressed the importance of education as a mechanism for social, political,

and economic development. The success of literacy campaign in Cuba, China, and the Soviet Union dominated the discussion at the UN agency. The role of mass education in the economic and social change in these particular countries, viewed as Cold War opponents, was an alarm signal for the US-led allied powers. A US government appraisal of Unesco in 1953 concluded that the UN agency had come under communist influence, and that the goals of “Fundamental Education” were “contrary to

– A Non-Communist Manifesto,” was the pointsman for the US move.

Then Unesco Director General Rene Maheu opted in 1966 to pursue the “purely economic” aim, establishing a 10-year Experimental World Literacy Project (EWLP) in 11 countries. In 1969, one-third of the way into the project, an internal evaluation found that the EWLP had not produced the expected results. It had fallen seriously behind schedule, partly due to scarce funding. The US, for instance, placed its



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ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY

American ideals and traditions.”

At the same time, the logic for fighting mass illiteracy could not be denied. Unesco faced increasing pressure from the administration of then US President Lyndon B Johnson to formulate a sanitised literacy programme called “functional” (the term used to refer to vocationally oriented literacy) rather than “mass” (the term used to refer to literacy meant to achieve political and social goals such as consciousness-raising). The latter became associated with Cuba and communism. WW Rostow, Johnson’s national security adviser who authored *“The Stages of Economic Growth*

fund with the UN Development Programme, rather than with Unesco directly. There were tensions between national and international objectives, and about traditional and functional approaches to literacy instruction. Director General Maheu still asserted that the basic approach of functional literacy was the right one. The report cited the approval of World Bank’s new president Robert McNamara (the architect of the Vietnam War as US defence secretary) as a good reason for the continuation of EWLP.

Unesco mounted a formal evaluation of EWLP in 1976 to reconsider the political,

social, and economic principles that underlie functional literacy. The evaluation team comprising members from Algeria, Brazil, Canada, India and Vietnam issued a scathing indictment of EWLP’s narrow aim that regarded people as cogs in the production machine. It was also critical of the motives of the US-led protagonists and the World Bank, who pushed this view.

McNamara, to his credit, introduced a new paradigm—“redistribution with growth” (meeting “basic needs” in the parlance of UN organisations)—instead of unalloyed economic growth during his 13-year tenure at the World Bank. This paradigm recognised the need for education as an investment in development. World Bank undertook a reassessment of its education strategy, which included an examination of the role of basic and non-formal education. A much-cited report, in preparing which this writer participated, was published by the bank. (Philip Coombs and Manzoor Ahmed, “Attacking Rural Poverty: How Nonformal Education Can Help,” 1974).

While the World Bank’s education investments increased and it included primary education for the first time, its economists, abetted by its bureaucracy, were still wary of supporting a broad vision of literacy. The bank’s self-defined agenda to promote redistribution excluded literacy, which was seen as ideologically linked with political, rather than economic goals. The idea of teaching poor people to read became entangled with fears of socialist revolution. The goal of a world campaign against illiteracy became a casualty of the Cold War.

Unesco has not been able to overcome the sad legacy of the Cold War. The way it defines and measures literacy (or lets countries do it), dictated by its executive board representing national governments, still remains a reductionist and mechanistic approach. Relying mostly on self-reporting of skill levels, rather than assessment by testing, raises questions about what these reported literacy rates really mean. The adult literacy projects are mostly “stand alone” and ad hoc activities, rather than a part of a lifelong learning strategy, despite recent rhetoric about lifelong learning. The Education for All (EFA) targets for literacy, first adopted in 2000 and reiterated in 2015, can be fairly described as reflecting a narrow view emphasising the mechanics of decoding symbols. Many countries have adopted programme strategies along this line and followed the simplistic and conventional definition-and-assessment approach.

The parallel to the global political dynamics that undermined the real aim and approach to

empower people through literacy can be seen in Bangladesh. The Awami League government, in its 2009 manifesto, promised to eliminate adult illiteracy by 2014. The approach indicated was similar to the previous Total Literacy Movement (TLM) initiated in 1996, which enrolled adults in courses set up by the politicians’ favourite NGOs and declared the enrollees to be literate after six months. Thus, many upazilas were proclaimed to be free of illiteracy. The TLM project was later dubbed as a “Total Loss of Money.”

Not until 2014, the target year to eliminate illiteracy, did the government finally take up the Basic Literacy Project to teach literacy and life skills to 450,000 people aged between 15 and 45 years in 64 districts. But the project did not begin until 2018. The life skills component was dropped “due to fund crisis.”

An evaluation report by the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) of the Planning Ministry said 63 percent of the participants were wrongly selected. Experts say an absence of proper planning, a lack of will and financing as well as the implementation capacity are the reasons behind slow progress of the project (“Literacy heading nowhere,” *The Daily Star*, September 8, 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to a halt whatever literacy activity was underway (“Literacy project falls thru,” *The Daily Star*, September 8, 2020). The increase in reported literacy rate is mainly the result of the spread of primary education.

A Non-formal Education Development Programme (NFEDP) was formulated by the government’s Bureau of Non-formal Education (BNFE) in collaboration with NGOs and academic stakeholders. It anticipated a workable multi-tier partnership model at national, district, upazila and union levels to set up a network of community learning centres and to expand the opportunity for literacy as a first step for lifelong learning. The NFEDP is premised on a concept of strong partnerships of state and non-state actors, substantial roles for NGOs, community organisations, local government; and supportive and facilitative regulatory processes and mechanisms, along with adequate funding.

A decision regarding the proposed NFEDP, however, remains stalled. Ambivalence at the policy-making level about the anticipated strong role of non-state actors appears to be a reason for the indecision. The political dynamic of policy and decision-making keeps success unattainable in respect of meaningful literacy.

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Community partnership can minimise learning gaps



SAYKAT BISWAS

WHILE schools are primarily responsible for facilitating schooling activities for the students, there are other factors as well that play crucial roles in ensuring the best learning experiences. Community

partnership is one of them.

The significance of community partnership in the context of primary education in Bangladesh is enormous, particularly when children are set to go back to school after an 18-month hiatus from regular academic activities because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The concept of community partnership is almost the same in different educational contexts, but its nature could vary from one context to another. Therefore, it is considered a highly situational phenomenon. Joyce Epstein, director of Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, said that community partnership is a situation where different groups of people collaborate with schools to run and manage events, support students’ academic activities, and take decisions democratically.

Considering the importance of community partnership in education, the World Declaration on Education for All, in its Article

27, puts a greater emphasis on strengthening partnership. The current pandemic situation has also heightened its importance. The major reason for prioritising community partnership is that, since schools could not be in touch with all their students proportionately, it would be tough for the teachers to properly understand what their students have been through during the pandemic. Hence through community partnership, teachers will be able to easily reach out to their students’ guardians to learn about the students’ academic and mental health conditions in detail.

Along with traditional teaching-learning practices, schools could help provide need-based and context-specific support to the pupils through community partnership, which may include trauma-informed and differentiated teaching. By building and strengthening partnership with the community, schools will also have greater opportunities to mobilise the resources of the community. In addition, it can help schools enhance their adaptivity to the post-Covid situation, which would eventually impact students’ academic achievements positively.

According to Harvard Family Research Project reports (2010), partnership can support, transform, and strengthen individual participants, which can eventually contribute to a better curriculum and the attainment of goals. Beside this, community partnership can contribute to students’ all-round improvements. Therefore, it can be said that



Community partnership is about building an efficient and sustainable relationship among the stakeholders to run the schools effectively.

FILE PHOTO: TDS

community partnership will play a crucial role in ensuring a better learning experience, particularly in the post-Covid period.

Bangladesh’s education policies have already undertaken two major initiatives to enhance the scopes of community partnerships: Parent-Teachers Association, and School Managing Committee. However, the results yielded by those initiatives are not satisfactory enough. A 2016 study, conducted by Mohammad Abul Hasnat, a Dhaka-based teacher, revealed that rural parents do not have a clear idea about whether or not their involvement is required and how they can

be involved. In government primary schools, which have limited resources, it has been observed that parents do not have much scope to get involved, although everything is there, just on pen and paper.

Bangladesh needs to pay close attention to the challenges around community partnership. In his study, Mohammad Abul Hasnat found that lack of communication from the school’s end is one of the major barriers to community involvement. Another issue is that many parents are not aware of what it takes to build and sustain the partnership with schools. Beside this, a small section of parents are

involved, but not actively engaged due to the lack of proactive communication. In addition to this, teachers of the government primary schools have to take extra administrative responsibilities besides their main duties. Therefore, many teachers and administrators lack the motivation and urge to build a strong partnership with the community.

In order to overcome the aforementioned roadblocks, the government can initiate a comprehensive programme, through which members of communities will develop a strong awareness of the importance of their partnership with the schools. Besides, research should be conducted to find the challenges as well as potential scopes for building effective and context-specific partnerships. The government should also introduce a range of policies dedicated to enhancing the partnership building process. Also, a sense of ownership and responsibility is important from everyone’s end to make it a success.

Finally, community partnership is about building an efficient and sustainable relationship among the stakeholders to run the schools effectively and to adapt to the needs of the students and community members. It can help students cope with the new normal and get the best out of formal schooling. Although Bangladesh has made some progress in building community partnerships for education, it still has room to grow.

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QUOTABLE
Quote

ALICE MILLER
(1923–2010)
Swiss psychologist

Learning is a result of listening, which in turn leads to even better listening and attentiveness to the other person. In other words, to learn from the child, we must have empathy, and empathy grows as we learn.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Out of bed
6 Chart of numbers
11 Cry of surrender
12 Mariner’s place
13 Share in a business
14 Baker’s need
15 Heir, often
16 Singing Sandra
18 CBS series with spinoffs
19 Conclude
20 Young buck
21 Batter’s goal
22 Puzzle
24 Follow the rules
25 Salacious

27 Different
29 Roman poet
32 Fan cry
33 — canto
34 Gun owner’s org.
35 Put away
36 Photo blowup: Abbr.
37 Young fox
38 Long attack
40 Past plump
42 Come in
43 Pool fill
44 Derby prize
45 Smart

DOWN
1 Winter apple
2 Chant

3 Tabloids
4 Moose’s kin
5 Pine parts
6 Trifled
7 Superb serve
8 Spots for sunning
9 Dog star
10 Being
17 Made of clay
23 Be litigious
24 “— Town”
26 Goes after
27 Pencil part
28 Barrio resident
30 Turning points
31 Diner, e.g.
33 Saloon orders
39 “My word!”
41 Ewe said it

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

S	A	B	E	R	S	W	A	M	P
A	G	A	P	E	T	I	B	I	A
P	O	R	E	D	O	C	E	A	N
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E	L	A	I	N	E	L	I	M	E
D	I	N	N	E	R	D	A	N	C
R	A	C	K	T	A	G	G	E	D
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W	R	O	T	E	S	E	E	D	Y

BEETLE BAILEY
BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES
BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT