
Illiteracy: Causes And Problem-solving

According to the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), at least 750 million people worldwide are illiterate (Blackman). Illiteracy, the inability to read and write, is caused by low socioeconomic status, lack of access to education, and inadequate resources and professional development for teachers. To solve illiteracy, developing countries need to provide more time and resources in their educational systems. Early intervention and literacy programs need to be accessible to children who struggle with poverty, children with reading disabilities, and children at risk for academic failure. Lastly, teachers need access to on-going expert advice, support, and high-quality professional learning.

Being illiterate is having the inability to read or write. The term “functionally illiterate” is often used to define people who hold an occupation but have low literacy skills. The UNESCO UIS stated in a 2014 study that 12% of the population is functionally illiterate (International Literacy Association). People afflicted with illiteracy are low ability readers, meaning they can have difficulty making inferences and connecting ideas (WETA). People who struggle with illiteracy also have difficulty demonstrating an understanding of essential context knowledge and understanding academic language (Helman). Those who are illiterate face poor health outcomes, welfare dependency, gender inequality, and lack of social acceptance (World Literacy Foundation).

One cause of illiteracy is low socioeconomic status. Illiteracy is most prevalent in developing countries; South Asian, Arab, and Sub-Saharan Countries have the highest illiteracy rates with 40-50% of their population illiterate (Mains). For instance, Chad (22%), Afghanistan (32%), and South Sudan (27%) have the lowest literacy rate in the world (Blackman). The per capita income of Chad is \$1,945, Afghanistan is \$1,976, and South Sudan is \$1,600, all at the lower end of the spectrum worldwide (United Nations). Contrarily, Switzerland has a per capita income of \$66,307 (9th highest worldwide) with a literacy rate of 99% (United Nations, Global Information Technology Report). This data demonstrates the effect that poverty has on a country's literacy rate. Further, poverty affects literacy on an individual level, as well. In the United States, the reading test ranges from a scale of 0 to 212. The average score for rural students was 122, urban students scored 124, and suburban students scored at 130 (Graham and Teague). As demonstrated, the rural and urban students scored 6-8 points lower than the suburban students. Although not large, these small differences in 3rd grade can have crucial effects the rural and urban students' later educational development. Low socioeconomic status can also affect children's vocabulary. At age 3, children from professional families have about 1,100 words in their vocabulary, children from working-class families have about 750 words in their vocabulary, and children from welfare families have around 500 words in their vocabulary (Morrison). A solution to children who live in poverty is support provided by tutoring programs. For example, in Detroit, the Beyond Basics organization created the “Rise to Read.” This program includes small group reading to help low performing students learn to read at or above grade level in 6 weeks. The Children's Literature Project allows families to learn what their child is being taught by discussing books their children are reading. This program allows not only the children, but the parents to learn, especially those who struggle with illiteracy. For adults, the Adult Basic Education helps illiterate and undereducated adults (Graff).

Another cause of illiteracy is lack of access to education. Three-quarters of the world's illiterate population are located in South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Wetheridge 11). South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa also had the widest gender inequality (Wetheridge 12). Of the 780 million people who are illiterate in the world, two-thirds (496 million) are women (Ford). Women who live in these areas of the world have unequal access to education; disparity in education begins in the primary level of women's education and continues into the secondary level (Wetheridge 7). Many of these countries marginalize women and deprive them of education (Wetheridge 10). Children with reading disabilities also face lack of access to education. For example, Iran implements the School Beginner Medical Assessment, a required medical test for enrollment in school. This test's purpose is to determine whether children are "teachable" or not, and if so, whether they can attend conventional school or a special school for children with disabilities ("Just Like Other Kids"). Because this assessment excludes girls with all types of abilities, children with intellectual disabilities and autism, and children living in remote or rural areas from quality education, this discriminatory test impedes the educational development of children by limiting access to education. . One known learning disability that affects literacy is dyslexia. Children with dyslexia are often just dismissed as poor readers. However, dyslexia is a neurological impairment that results in poor word recognition skills including phonological processing (WETA). Children with dyslexia have a slow rate of reading and have reading difficulty on timed tasks. Further, these children misuse function words and suffixes and often have erratic oral reading (WETA). When students with dyslexia don't receive early intervention and effective instruction, literacy is hindered (Literacy Foundation). Providing adequate support will help students who are behind in school as well as misdiagnosed students. To address the issue of lack of access to education, countries need to allow gender-equal education, especially the first few important years of literacy development. To help children with learning disabilities, schools should offer on-going support in the classroom, as well as one on one learning.

One final cause for illiteracy is inadequate professional development for teachers. Teachers who are unable to effectively implement curriculum for students jeopardize their education. Performance in early years (grades 3 and 4) strongly predicts later academic performance (Morrison). For example, children who struggle in 1st grade are 88% more likely to struggle in 4th grade; those children who struggle in 4th grade are four times more likely to drop out of school (Lexia). The importance of effective teaching is crucial in a student's early years. The gap between the highest and lowest students in reading and writing can be 6 or more years of school (Masters). However, only 45% of teachers feel prepared to implement new ways of teaching, 36% feel prepared to implement state/district curriculum, and only 20% of teachers feel prepared to teach limited English, disabled, and culturally diverse students (Morrison). Inconsistencies in resources, curriculum and instruction lead to ineffective instruction for students. To fix this problem, teachers need support, as well as access to high-quality, on-going professional development in literacy, particularly within content areas (Masters). Teachers should have training in a wide range of intervention practices including individualized instruction (Masters).

To solve illiteracy, countries need to invest time and resources to create effective education for all people, including those with low socioeconomic status, women and those with learning disabilities. For those who struggle with poverty, early intervention and tutoring programs need be accessible. Further, teachers need on-going professional development in teaching literacy skills, as well as students with learning disabilities. Ending the rise in illiteracy is crucial in making our world an exceptional, modern world.

