

Generational Illiteracy Part III

The illiterate of the future will not be the person who cannot read. It will be the person who does not know how to learn. -Alvin Toffler

Did you know there were two types of Literacy?

The first is *conventional literacy*, which is realized when an individual can read, write, and comprehend material, as well as, understand whatever signs, labels, instructions, and directions are necessary to get along within one's environment. The second is *functional literacy*, which is defined as realized when an individual can function in their own environment and to reach success in their own roles in society. These individuals can read and write adequately to satisfy the requirements they set for themselves. The question that follows is: are these individuals reaching their actual potentials or are they just surviving in a world that is based on conventional literacy guidelines?

Studies show that most people who are not literate are in situations where providing for their families monetarily, taking care of sick children, and putting food on the table takes precedents over whether or not they can read or write adequately. Also, in some cases, language-minority students come from literacy-impooverished homes where education is not valued or supported. Consequently, those families that are literacy impoverished tend to breed children who are not attempting to reach their own literacy achievements on their own.

There can be little freedom -- personal, economic, religious -- without literacy. During this time when the nation and many of its citizens continue to struggle in an economy and society radically different than that of just a few years ago, the inability to read and to write hinders the ability to pursue the life, liberty and happiness central to the American experience.

Reading and writing are central to individual progress and freedom. No man, woman or child can be free if they are shackled by illiteracy. There is no guarantee that reading and writing will bring a lifetime of benefits, but there is growing certainty that the inability to do so is a direct handicap in seeking those benefits.

Young people who are unable to read or who read poorly almost always do poorly in school. Children who perform poorly in school (especially if they do not earn a high school diploma) find it difficult, if not impossible to find fulfilling employment. Adults who are unemployed or underemployed quite often discover that it is almost impossible to partake in the "American dream". The truth is that reading and writing are essential skills in the contemporary world.

Once, physical strength and agility coupled with a strong work ethic were enough to get a man or woman with a job that could provide financial comfort and an accepted place in society. That has changed. Now, even the most basic jobs require the ability to add a column of figures, to read a diagram or use a computer or other electronic device. Those who are unable to perform

these basic tasks will be left behind in the increasingly competitive and technological workplace where literacy is no longer an option but a necessity.

There is a remedy to the issue of illiteracy, but implementing it will require patience, skill and money. . .

The corrective starts at home, continues in schools and extends to adult education. Children who are exposed to books at home (before pre-school) generally read and learn at higher levels than those who are not. There are public and private initiatives that encourage home reading and provide books to parents who cannot afford them, but their reach may, in some cases, be limited.

Educators work diligently to teach literacy skills, but success is not always certain. It is true that the number of American school children who read at grade level, or above, is slowly improving on the whole, but progress is not uniform. Proven programs that provide a stronger connection between public schools and homes where literacy is not a given are scarce. The same can be said about in-school programs dedicated to improving literacy skills.

Lack of funding has always been a problem for many reading-specific programs, but the nation's current economic conditions have made appropriations from federal, state and local governments even scarcer. These programs, even in troubled times, deserve more meaningful support.

"As individuals and a nation, we increasingly will be gauged by our ability to interact with a knowledge-driven world in which only the truly literate will be able to compete. A revitalized national commitment to provide every American with functional literacy skills would go a long way toward safeguarding the United States' place among the globe's economic and educated elite." -Time Free Press

MILLER, Kathryn E. 1984. *Functional Literacy: Why and What Difference?*
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