

Literacy: A foundation for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

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I am pleased to introduce this ambitious and thought-provoking issue of *Prospects*, which focuses on the key role of literacy in achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: “Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning”. One of the ten targets for this goal is: “By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy”. All the SDGs and their targets are important, but achieving this basic education target will provide a foundation that supports the achievement of all the other targets for SDG4.

In acknowledgement of the importance of achieving the literacy target, we welcome scholars and practitioners who focus on literacy and numeracy, with a special emphasis on curriculum, learning, and assessment, to share insights into ways to overcome the many obstacles to meeting the SDG target for literacy. More to the point, we continue to foster a free exchange of ideas and provide an appropriate platform for presenting, discussing, and disseminating new concepts, current trends, theoretical developments and research findings related to advancing the Education 2030 agenda.

This issue of *Prospects* is our second guest edited issue on literacy, after *Learning to Read: From Research to Policy and Practice*. John P. Comings, the guest editor of this special issue, is a senior technical consultant at World Education (after serving for 12 years as the Vice President of the same organization), and faculty at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He also served in the Obama Administration as an education policy advisor focused on the USAID’s early-grade reading initiative. Using his wealth of experience as both an academic and a practitioner, he changes the perspective from seeing reading as a social practice (see previous *Prospects* issue on learning to read, guest edited by Brian Street), to identifying concrete actions to make and assess progress towards reaching the SDG 4. With assessment tools and benchmarks, he argues, the international community can focus on curriculum and learning that builds the skills of primary school children, youth, and adults.

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Luis Crouch and Katherine A. Merseth highlight patterns in school enrollment indicators that affect the efficiency and effectiveness of education systems in low-income countries that have expanded access quickly in the last decade or two, but have not yet absorbed that expansion efficiently. Although the patterns in these indicators are observable in the first few years of schooling, they could constitute a cause of low learning outcomes at the end of primary school. The data show strong empirical relationships between an early primary enrollment bulge, low levels of pre-primary participation, and poor performance on early grade cognitive skills.

Helen N. Boyle and Wail Salah examine whether the grade 2 Arabic-language textbook supports the goals of the early-grade reading reform in Egypt. In light of disappointing scores on the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), Arabic-speaking countries have begun to reexamine, and in some cases reform, how they teach reading in the early grades. Egypt was one of the first countries to initiate early-grade reading reforms in 2010. The authors contend that modest textbook reform could be the easiest and fastest way to improve the teaching and learning of reading in Egypt and the region, in part because textbooks are generally available and teachers depend heavily on them for lesson structure.

Paul Jurma presents a case study of a five-year English-literacy project carried out in primary and middle schools in the Pacific island nation of Tonga from 2012 to 2017, which aimed at building Tongan educators' capacities to create, use, and sustain "child centered" (or "student centered") instructional and assessment practices; use books, libraries, and technologies to support literacy development; strengthen family and community support for children's learning and literacy development; and increase access by young children and in-school and out-of-school youth and adults to literacy development opportunities. The article concludes with recommendations for actions that policymakers, practitioners, and parents might take to build a more effective literacy development system in their nations.

John P. Comings, John Strucker, and Brenda Bell describe two assessment tools that have been used to assess the reading skills of youth participating in alternative basic skills and livelihood skills training programs. The Rapid Assessment of Reading Skills (RARS) was developed to identify potential participants who needed to improve their reading skills before beginning training and to assign them to the proper level of basic reading instruction. The Out-of-School Literacy Assessment incorporates RARS into a more complex impact evaluation tool. Both assessment tools, the authors argue, can also be used to inform program design, define benchmarks, and assess impact.

Thomas M. Crea and colleagues examine the extent to which childhood literacy rates are associated with parents' and teachers' perceptions of community violence and cohesion, following participation in a large-scale school feeding program in the Department of Intibucá, Honduras. School feeding appears to be related to strengthened social bonds among parents, which in turn are associated with higher literacy rates among children. The extent to which these social bonds influence child well-being and literacy over time, above and beyond the impacts of school feeding, is an important area of future study.

Vachaspati Shukla and Udaya S. Mishra evaluate the progress in literacy in India, from an age-cohort perspective. They argue that age-cohort analysis offers a robust understanding of the dynamics of literacy progress and conclude that, despite the accomplishment of universal elementary education, achieving the goal of full literacy is quite difficult, owing to the existence of an out-of-school-age illiterate population. Thus, the authors suggest the provision of an effective adult-literacy programme along with universal elementary education in order to realize the goal of full literacy.

This special issue also includes a Profile of Madhav Chavan, co-founder and CEO-president of Pratham, an organization that reaches three million primary school age children in India every year. Madhav Chavan is the 2012 WISE Prize for Education Laureate. Under his leadership, Pratham has introduced several mass-scale innovations such as the Annual Status of Education Report in the area of assessment and the Read India movement, which delivers education to the underprivileged. The organization has been recognized by the Kravis Prize and the Skoll Award for its innovativeness and leadership as an organization of social entrepreneurs in the area of education.