

Literacy and Health

There are many global development issues in which education and literacy can play an important part but never before has the link between health and literacy been more prominent than it is today. With serious issues like HIV/AIDS, chronic malnutrition, malaria and a host of others having dire consequences in the developing world, literacy can be a valuable tool to help fight these scourges.

Children in developing countries suffer from many of these health problems, leaving them weak and sometimes blind, where serious malnutrition and parasitic diseases are prevalent, seriously inhibiting their ability to learn or even to go to school. For example, a World Bank study confirmed that a very high rate of malnutrition in children under five in countries such as Bangladesh (68%) and India (63%) was a key contributing factor in accounting for low literacy levels in children in those countries (World Bank, 1995).

Without good health, it is very difficult to obtain even a low level of literacy in such countries. The converse is also argued to be true in that without a functional level of literacy children and their parents are not able to learn about good health practices and how to avoid infection and how to provide necessary nutrition, for example. A report by the World Bank states that even one year of schooling for women can lower fertility rates by as much as 10% and one to two years of schooling can reduce child mortality rates by 15% (World Bank, 2002).

In parts of Africa, HIV/AIDS has taken so much of the adult population that many areas have schools but there are either no teachers to teach the children or the teachers are too sick to teach effectively. At issue is also the fact that so many children are not able to attend schools either because of being infected and sick with the disease or having to stay home to care for afflicted parents and other family members or to take over family responsibilities such as earning money, tending livestock and farming.

In developing countries around the world an excess of 113 million children are not in school, of which two-thirds are girls. Of the children who are able to begin school, approximately 25% drop out before they become literate. Of the 55 poorest countries who are deemed unlikely to reach the goal of Education for All by 2015, more than half of these countries are among the worst hit by HIV/AIDS in the world (World Bank, 2002). For example, 100 educational institutions were forced to close at the end of the 1990s in the Central African Republic where 12.9 percent of the adult population of was infected with the disease (UNAIDS, 2002).

Healthcare and pharmaceuticals are no longer seen as the only way to fight these tragedies – a more integrated approach is called for and prevention is key. Literacy and education are seen now to play a vital role in fighting these global health problems by many in the international development community. A few suggested ways that education and literacy can help in the fight against HIV/AIDS, Malaria, chronic malnutrition, and high fertility rates, for example, are:

- Alternate forms of schooling, more flexible schedules that move away from the age-related grade system toward modules and semesters.
- Incorporation of health issues into school curriculums including programs developed for vulnerable children and other children who are not able to attend school.
- Development of programs to ensure that children are given the relevant life skills to help them develop positive social behaviors and to cope with negative pressures in their lives (Collymore, 2002)

UNESCO, which works with IRA on literacy and teacher training programs in Africa is an important advocate in this literacy and health trend.

“UNESCO supports responses to HIV and AIDS that are inclusive and sensitive to the needs and issues of all of the population, but with particular attention to key populations especially vulnerable to HIV and young people in school settings.

UNESCO plays a leading role in EDUCAIDS and the UNAIDS Inter-Agency Task Team (IATT) on Education, which are viewed as key mechanisms in strengthening the UNAIDS combined effort to achieve Universal Access to prevention programs, treatment, care and support. “

<http://www.educaids.org/>

References

Greaney, Vincent, World Bank, Editor, *Promoting Reading in Developing Countries:* International Reading Association, 1996

Collymore, Yvette, *Universal Education Seen as Crucial in AIDS Fight*, 2002.