Falling through the literacy net

**Millions of Asians are, unfortunately, denied a basic education**

CLIVE WING

Ahead of his retirement in December, Sheldon Shaeffer, director of the Bangkok-based Unesco Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, talked with the agency's Information and Knowledge Management chief, Clive Wing, about literacy scandals and misconceptions of how Unesco works.

Isn't it a scandal that we still have at least 510 million people in Asia who are illiterate?

I would consider it as even more than a scandal as the number you quoted is based more often on answering "Yes" to the questions "Are you literate?" and "Did you go to school for five years?"

What we've found in countries where we've done representative sample surveys of literacy performance is that the actual rate is 20 to 25 percent less. I keep saying to Unesco and ministers of education, "Don't quote the 510 million figure, assume it's 640 million."

Take into account, too, that the literacy gap between those who speak the national language and those who speak other languages at home is bigger, and that the gap between men and women is bigger. So, too, is the gap between urban and rural dwellers. So, the scandal is even greater.

But it's traditionally been difficult to get donors interested in adult literacy. For example, at the Jomtien Conference in 1990, trying to get the World Bank to consider illiteracy as an important issue was difficult. The feeling was "let's not deal with illiterate adults because eventually they'll disappear. So, instead, let's try to make all children literate."

Never mind the loss of a generation!

This is such a mistake when you're trying to deal with literate families and literate parents encouraging their children to go to school. Adults have literacy needs as well. The "Literacy Decade" event and literacy conferences that have been held recently in an attempt to put this subject higher on the agenda have had a bit of an impact, but much more should be done. Governments should do surveys of literacy to find out the real nature of the problem.
This also links to the other major problem that Unesco should do more about, which is the quality of education in schools. What we're finding out more and more from international studies and national studies like those done recently in Thailand, is that a large percentage of children in school are not literate. So this assumption of the past - let's concentrate on schoolchildren and make them literate so we don't have to worry about them in future - isn't valid either.

The truth is that a relatively large percentage of students in school are not considered functionally literate. That's a developed and a developing world phenomenon.

Unesco doesn't have enough focus on learning assessment and measuring achievement. Much needs to be done on the transition from early childhood to a successful career in primary school and to be much more focused on ensuring the real quality of Grades 1 (Prathom 1) and 2 (Prathom 2), the early grades.

Being able to create a strong foundation in literacy also means extra training for teachers. If you don't become literate in the first few years, then you're likely to drop out and never become literate.

Very few teacher training systems around the world identify teachers early on who will teach the early grades, and inculcate in them special skills to do so. And very few education systems put their best teachers in Grades 1 and 2.

There's a common misconception that Unesco does all the things it advocates; for example, we train all the teachers in Thailand. How would you describe our work?

I'd say that we don't! What we strive to do is to influence the curriculum of Thailand's teacher training institutions and the training methods used in those institutions, so that better teachers are the result.

This is difficult because every country has a different mechanism for teacher training. Some have more focus on in-service than pre-service training or vice versa. Although it has a focus on pre-service, Thailand has a Dean's Forum comprised of teacher training faculties and faculties of education, and its members make a lot of decisions about teacher training curricula.

In another country, you might have a director-general of teacher education who decides the curriculum. In other countries, teacher training institutions are quite independent. They follow a general curriculum but can decide individually how they want to do it.

So, it's difficult to intervene in a standard fashion in teacher education reform. But, in general, what we try to do is improve the content of what is taught in teacher education.

That means adding in not only good methodologies and things like literacy, but also the content areas that we think are important: sustainable development, gender, human rights education and a whole range of more values-based topics.

It also means looking in general at teacher education policies: How are they being made and how can we influence them?

The entire interview with Mr Shaeffer is at: http://tinyurl.com/3jvcoc.

- Sheldon Shaeffer joined Unesco in 1990 at the International Institute for Educational Planning in Paris as a senior research fellow. After three years working on developing training materials on how to promote more community-level participation in education, he went on to Unicef in Bangkok and New York, and then back to Unesco in Bangkok in 2000 as head of the office. He will be retiring in December. His wisdom and leadership will be missed.

Clive Wing is chief of the Information and Knowledge Management Unit at Unesco Bangkok.

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