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**PHOENIX IN THE ASHES
ADULT LITERACY IN THE COMMONWEALTH CARIBBEAN**

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AEA	Adult Education Association
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
CC	Commonwealth Caribbean
CHS	Community High Schools
CODE	Canadian Organization for Development Education
CXCSEC	Caribbean Examinations Council Secondary Education Certificate
ERP	Educational Renewal Programme
FLSOSY	Functional Literacy Study of Out of School Youth
GBF	Guyana Book Foundation
HDI	Human Development Index
HDR	Human Development Report
JAMAL	Jamaica Movement for the Advancement of Literacy
OSY	Out of School Youth
PwTs	Primary Schools with Tops
SSEE	Secondary School Entrance Examination
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WCEFA	World Conference on Education for All

About the Author

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ABSTRACT

This monograph explores the literacy problem in Commonwealth Caribbean (CC) countries, and highlights research in the Region which underscores the seriousness of the problem of illiteracy as we approach the Year 2000, designated as the year for achieving the objective of *Literacy for All*. Some of the causes of the literacy problem are examined and a case study is presented of the Functional Literacy of Out-of-School Youth (OSY) in Guyana. This study showed that only a small minority of the OSY are functionally literate, with the majority achieving at a moderate level of functional literacy. Statistically significant differences in achievement in functional literacy according to gender, highest level of education attained, ethnicity, and employment status are reported. Drawing on the imagery of the legendary phoenix whose consumption by fire symbolises the state of adult education today, the author puts forward suggestions on how adult education and adult literacy in particular can be regenerated from the ashes. These include the need to (a) recognise that illiteracy is a problem in the Region; (b) use more reliable and valid methods for measuring adult literacy so that more accurate information can be given to the international data bases; and (c) adopt a more holistic approach to educational planning which embraces adult and continuing education and gives the latter a more dynamic role in national development. The author underscores the importance of political will if the problem of illiteracy is to be addressed, and stresses the need for opportunities in their societies for ALL persons of varying levels of literacy to improve their literacy skills, in order to keep apace with the changing demands of increasingly technological societies.

INTRODUCTION

We must consider the problem of adult literacy. Many developing countries have concluded that the adult illiterate must be treated as expendable on the grounds that resources are scarce and that other needs must be met. I reject this thesis... it is impossible to create either a modern economy or a just society if a substantial proportion of the adult population is denied the social tools, reading and writing, which are indispensable to full participation in either the economic or social system of a modern nation state. (Manley, 1974, p. 158)

It seems like yesterday but this statement was made a quarter of a century ago by the late Prime Minister of Jamaica. And yet, what he says is as true today as it was then.

Adult literacy rates reported for Commonwealth Caribbean (CC) countries range from 85.5% (Jamaica), 97% (Barbados), to 98.1% (Guyana) (see Table 1). These rates are comparable to those in some developed countries. Miller (1989) maintains that due to the efficiency of their primary schooling “Caribbean countries have attained similar levels of functional literacy as the industrialized countries, at much lower cost” (p. 162). This suggests that literacy is not a problem in CC countries. What tends to be obscured, however, is the fact that most primary school children achieve in literacy at two or three grade levels below where they ought to be. There is a need, as Craig (1990) has pointed out, to distinguish between the efficiency and the effectiveness of primary schooling. Primary schooling in the Caribbean may be efficient in terms of its percentage enrolment, but its learning processes in many CC countries have been ineffective. This brings into question the credibility of any statistics on adult literacy which are derived from primary school enrolment.

And yet, this is the very measure on which some of the adult literacy rates given above are based. The percentage of children completing Grade 6 is the measure of adult literacy in some countries, for example, Barbados (Miller, 1989). The use of different criteria to determine these rates makes cross-country comparisons problematic. What is clear, however, is that there is a literacy problem and that it differs in degree from country to country. While Barbados may have equalled the functional literacy level of Canada and the United States of America (Miller, 1989), and St. Kitts may have “the highest level of literacy in the region” (World Bank, 1993, p. 103), there are countries like Guyana where the results of a recent national functional literacy survey have been described as reflecting “a national disaster” (Jonas, 1998, p. 69). The question arises how this country could, in 1999, be credited with the highest adult literacy rate, surpassing even Barbados and St. Kitts. Are all the adult literacy rates in Table 1 *realistic*? The accuracy of reported adult literacy rates has been questioned in other developing countries. In the case of Sri Lanka, for example, Gunawardena (1997) notes that “the literacy rates of 90% and above being circulated in official circles are far from being realistic” (p. 606).

Aims of the Study

This study seeks to:

1. **highlight** research on literacy (especially adult), with special emphasis on the decade of the nineties, in an effort to ascertain the seriousness of the literacy problem and its possible causes.
2. **examine** the problem of literacy amongst out-of-school youth using a case study from Guyana.

3. **discuss** some implications of the findings relating to 1 and 2, and make recommendations on the way forward.

It is hoped that this study will prove informative to policy makers, planners and practitioners in education, and particularly those who are involved in adult literacy programmes.

CHAPTER 1

Adult Literacy in the Commonwealth Caribbean: Rhetoric Versus Reality

Writing on literacy assessment in the Third World, Wagner (1990) observed that despite the social and economic resources made available for literacy work, little is still known about the nature and extent of the literacy problem in the Third World. "Are current estimated literacy rates too low or too high?" he asks (p. 134).

There is a tendency, of course, to associate high levels of illiteracy with poor developing countries where annual income per capita is less than US\$700, cultural facilities and social services are practically non-existent, living and health conditions are poor, and life expectancy short (Fisher, 1982). Given the adult literacy rates reported in Table 1, one would expect that this applies to few countries in the Commonwealth Caribbean (CC). In fact, it would seem that the picture fits only Guyana where, indeed, one finds the theme of poverty and debt recurring in the speeches of its political leadership (see, for example, Jagan, 1995). But this scenario does not seem consistent with Guyana having *the* highest adult literacy rates (98.1%) amongst the CC countries. In fact, with such a high rate, instead of being the poorest of the CC countries with the lowest life expectancy,¹ Guyana really ought to be much better off, if Bowman and Anderson (1973) are indeed correct that an 80% national literacy rate is necessary for rapid economic growth. The question arises whether, in fact, these rates are accurate.

The International Bureau of Education's CD-ROM, *World Data on Education* (1998), gives a 1995 estimate of the illiterate population in Guyana aged 15 years and over as 1.9%. This is lower than that for both Barbados (2.6%) and Trinidad and Tobago (2.1%). Could this really be so when on the Human Development Index (HDI), both Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago are ranked at #29 and #46 respectively on the HDI rank, compared with a ranking of Guyana at #99 in the medium HDI (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1999)?

The accuracy with which the adult literacy rates in Table 1 represent the real situation in the CC countries has been seriously questioned in a number of instances. In the UNDP Human Development Report (HDR) 1993, Jamaica's adult literacy rate in 1990 is given as 98.4%, but a UNESCO source gave the rate in the same year as 83% (Paul, 1996). The HDR 1995 records the adult literacy rate in Jamaica in 1992 as 83.7%. Depending on which report one accepts, there has either been a phenomenal decrease in Jamaica's adult literacy over a two year period (and this would be without any intervention in national literacy during this time) or a marginal increase. Which one is correct? The Jamaica National Literacy Survey 1994 (Statistical Institute of Jamaica, 1995) casts doubt on the accuracy of either, given that the adult literacy rate was in fact found to be 75.4%.

But the problem lies not only with Jamaica. The findings of the 1991 census for Belize, indicated that the adult literacy rate was more likely between the upper 70s to the lower 80s in percentage terms (Belize, 1992). Thus the rate of 96% in 1992 (see Table 1), according to local research is a "myth" (Duke, 1995). The adjustment to 75% in 1997 is quite considerable. In fact, if we accept the statistics in Table 1, Belize now has the lowest adult literacy rate in CC countries. With reference to Grenada, Hickling-Hudson (1989) observed that the quality of education offered at the primary level "left many of the pupils barely literate and numerate, as was illustrated by their very poor performance in examinations and by the high rate of minimal literacy among the adult population" (p. 101). Local research in other CC countries also questions the accuracy of reported adult literacy rates. Browne (1987) highlights research in St. Vincent and the Grenadines which puts functional illiteracy among the adult population as high as 50%. Functional illiteracy in Trinidad and Tobago is put at 15% of the adult population (Adult Literacy Tutors Association, 1995). Research consistently shows that the literacy problem is most serious amongst the youth and young adults in the region (Ellis, 1990; Jules, 1990). This applies even to the young adults in the regional universities. Lalla (1992), for example, observes that "even quite basic sentence structure in the official language lies beyond the competence of many tertiary students" (p. 17), and Craig (1997) shows that first

year students at the University of Guyana make spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors made by primary and secondary school students. Contrary to what the adult literacy rates in Table 1 imply, local research in Table 2 clearly points to a serious situation with regard to adult literacy in CC countries which, in some of these countries, has been described as having reached crisis point. How do we account for this state of affairs?

Measures of Adult Literacy: Confusion Worse Confounded

Part of the “crisis” lies in the fact that we do not know what the figures for adult literacy really represent on account of the fact that: (a) *literacy* means different things to different people, and (b) countries use different measures for the assessment of adult literacy.

Definitions

Wagner (1995) expresses the view that “Literacy ... is usually defined in terms of the individuals’ ability to read and write within the context of his or her society” (p. 351). But there are differences in opinion on what constitutes “being able to read and write.” Is word calling and being able to copy from a given script sufficient, or must the individual be able to comprehend what is read and render in writing his or her own ideas? Then there are other writers who see literacy not just as a functional skill but as a means of empowerment. Thus, literacy is “the liberation of a mind from the bondage of dependence” (Noor, 1982, p. 163), and “critical literacy” is an emancipating process in which one not only reads the word but also the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

The situation is further complicated by the fact that terms like *basic*, *simple*, and *functional literacy* are sometimes used synonymously, while at other times they each have more specific meanings. Mayo (1995, p. 363), for example, sees functional literacy as “the technical process of acquiring basic reading skills necessary to follow instructions, read signs, fill in forms, etc.” Kuboni (1992, p. 25) also limits the concept to “a collective of language-based skills,” but there are others who see *functional literacy* as incorporating, alongside language skills, the individuals’ ability to make effective mathematical use of a number system. UNESCO (1978), for example, includes reading, writing, and calculation in its definition of functional literacy, and numeracy has also featured in the testing of functional literacy in Lesotho (Ziegahn, 1992) and in Jamaica’s *National Literacy Survey 1994* (1995). Given these various definitions, exactly how is literacy defined by governments in the different countries in Table 1?

Measures of literacy/functional literacy

There are five ways in which literacy/functional literacy has been assessed. Firstly, there is *lack of schooling* as a measure. Governments in CC countries have tended to use the proportion of the population with zero years of schooling as the measure of the proportion of illiterates in the country. Figures provided by Carrington (1992), for example, show that these proportions vary from 0.5% (Barbados) to 10.3% (St. Lucia). This is not an altogether reliable measure since formal schooling is not the only means whereby literacy is acquired. Furthermore, research by Jennings (1998a) underscores the difficulty of getting access to absolute illiterates in the society, as parents and family tend to seclude them from attention.

Census analysts have also used *four years of primary schooling* as a proxy measure for literacy. Myers (1989), in fact, notes that “international world literacy figures are generally based on the Grade 4 reading level achievement, so students reading at Grade 4 level and above are regarded as functionally literate” (p. 194). The research by Myers also shows why level of primary schooling is not a good measure of literacy. He notes that although 69.5% of Jamaican Grade 6 students were functionally literate in that they were reading at Grade 4 level and above, “70.5% were reading below Grade 6 level. This meant that 70.5% of the students completing their primary school education were underachieving in reading (p 195).

Research in Guyana has shown that in the Language Arts and mathematics 84% and 92% respectively of students in the first form of secondary schools performed below Grade 5 level (Secondary School Reform Project, 1997).

The percentage of primary school enrolment is also used as a proxy measure for literacy, but this is not a reliable measure either. Primary schooling in the CC countries may be efficient but its learning processes are not very effective. There is a vast difference, furthermore, between school enrolment and school attendance. In some countries, large numbers of children on school registers do not attend school regularly, and some not at all. For example, the national attendance rate at the primary level in Guyana in the 1995-96 school year was 75%, with the level falling to about 50% in certain regions. The average rate of attendance for boys in one region was 38.8%! (Guyana, 1997).

Self Assessment is another method of assessing literacy often used in censuses. But asking respondents whether they are literate or not is clearly an unacceptable measure, and a highly subjective one, since people have different conceptions of what it is to be literate.

Carrington (1992) points out that there is a tendency on the part of some governments to use the *proportions of failures at the Caribbean Examinations Council Secondary Education Certificate (CXCSEC)* as a measure of the level of literacy. If this is the trend, there would need to be a standard interpretation of *pass* since, prior to 1998, some governments included Grade III as a passing grade, while others used only Grades I and II. The CXCSEC, however, is not an appropriate measure of literacy/functional literacy rates at the national level since it caters to only about 15% of the age cohort in the CC countries as a whole.

Direct measurement is another method used for assessing literacy. Typically, this involves the use of objective-type tests such as multiple choice items. This method has been used in literacy studies in the United States of America (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986) and Lesotho (Ziegahn, 1992).

The preceding discussion underscores the point made by Carrington (1992) that “the extent of illiteracy, basic or functional, within the Commonwealth Caribbean cannot be accurately stated in numerical terms using the measures from which they are usually inferred. Informed decisions are necessary on useful definitions of literacy and on relevant interpretations of the definitions” (p. 3).

Some Causes of the Literacy Problem

(1) Low proficiency in the primary school output

Research in Table 2 indicates some of the causes of the literacy problem, for example, the research by Myers (1989) which shows the majority of Jamaican primary school graduates underachieving in reading. The report of the World Bank (1993) concluded that the quality of primary education was low throughout the region “particularly in the areas of reading, writing and numeracy” (p. 68)--areas which are critical for functional literacy. This is borne out in analyses of Secondary School Entrance Examination (SSEE) results. In Guyana, for example, between 1980-1990 results show that out of a maximum mean score of 60, the mean score in mathematics and English has not exceeded 21.0 (Jennings, 1999). The problem is there even in Barbados--the country which, perhaps, has the most effective primary education system in the region. The *White Paper on Education Reform* (1995) indicates that 26% of the children who did the Barbados Secondary School Entrance Examination in 1995 scored less than 30% in English and mathematics combined.

In some countries, high drop out rates, variable attendance rates, and grade repetition compound the problem. In Belize, for example, some 20% of the primary school enrolment drop out of school. In Guyana, about 7.8% of the children drop out in the final grade of primary school (Craig & Illes-Deekman, 1998). Youngsters who drop out of school do not have the required amount of instruction in literacy and numeracy, and duration of instruction is related to literacy retention (Comings, 1995).

Grade repetition is a deleterious practice. In the 1994/95 school year in Guyana, for example, 60.8% of the boys and 39.2% of the girls repeated the first grade in primary school. In the final grade, 55.4% of the boys repeated compared with 44.6% of the girls (Guyana, 1996).

What is also evident from the research in Table 2 is that there are socioeconomic, health, and nutrition factors which impact on children's achievement in literacy. Research from Trinidad and Tobago, for example, underscores the importance of nutrition and a literate-rich environment for successful reading (Trinidad and Tobago, 1993).

(2) Weaknesses in the methodology of teaching language, literacy and reading

In his assessment of primary education in the Caribbean, Miller (1989) lauds the Caribbean in having "not fallen far shy of the industrialized countries" (p. 109) in terms of producing excellent education levels on a mass basis. A consequence of mass education, however, is the dominance of Creole-speaking children in classrooms. While it has been recognised by researchers, since the mid-1960s, that a second-dialect approach to teaching Standard English to Creole speakers is needed, there is a persistence in the use of a native-language approach to the teaching of English, which treats Creole-speaking children as though they are native speakers of Standard European language. The dominance of this approach has been attributed to the training in English/Literature for those responsible for training and supervising teachers of the Language Arts and English (Craig, 1996). The situation is complicated by those researchers who advocate that the Creole should become the language of instruction and that children should be taught to learn to read in Creole. Experiments of this nature have taken place in certain countries (e.g., St. Lucia).

The teacher's own language is a problem, and in some countries teachers have been criticised for being poor role models for the use of standard English. The report of the National Task Force on Education in the Bahamas (1994, p. 36), for example, is critical of the quality of Bahamian teachers in this regard .

A criticism often made today is that young people show little, if any interest, in reading books. This may well have to do, partly, with the methodology used in the teaching of reading, since a number of countries integrate reading into the Language Arts, and so reading suffers from the same problems highlighted for the teaching of the Language Arts (Jennings, 1998b). The inferior performance of boys in reading at the primary level compared to that of the girls has been attributed, in some measure, to the fact that they are taught to read by female teachers; hence they come to see reading as a "feminine activity." Having more male teachers as role models in the primary school may help to address this problem, but this seems a remote possibility given the salaries of primary school teachers in the region. But the absence, in primary schools, of a variety of reading books that would attract the different interests of the learners is clearly another factor contributing to the problem.

(3) Deficiencies at the secondary level

The secondary level experiences problems similar to those at the primary level with regard to school drop-out, grade repetition, and low attendance rates. Some regions in Guyana record up to 21% drop-out for males in the general secondary schools and 67% for females in the Community High schools (Guyana, 1997). The World Bank country study on the Caribbean region highlighted the inadequate amount of time devoted in the timetable for English and mathematics, and the low pass rates in these subjects, resulting in "low levels of attainment in literacy and numeracy for many students entering and leaving secondary school" (World Bank, 1993, p. 100). A total of 40% of the textbooks in Jamaica's secondary schools, the report notes, cannot be used "because of weak literacy and numeracy skills" (p. 100).

Not surprisingly, these deficiencies impact on the performance of students in the CXCSEC, especially in English. The analysis by Craig (1998) shows that most countries achieve below 50% success

at Grades 1 and II, General Proficiency, with more countries showing a decline rather than an improvement.

This observation is all the more startling when one realises that it refers to the less than 20% of the regions' secondary-age population which achieve entry to the CXC examination. What then of the 80% or more who are not of the academic standard for entry to the CXCSEC? Most of them are to be found in the so-called "schools for failure," namely, the Community High schools (Guyana), the former New Secondary schools (Jamaica), and in the All Age schools which are found throughout the region.

The case study of Guyana which follows should throw some light on this question.

CHAPTER 2

Functional Literacy of Out-of-school Youth in Guyana: A Case Study

The Literacy Survey shows that the light is departing our minds. The sub-title of this terrifying survey might as well have been 'The Dumbing of Guyana' (McDonald, 1996, p. 7)

The Context

Guyana is a multiracial society made up of East Indians, African-Guyanese, persons of mixed race, Amerindians (the indigenous people), Chinese, Portuguese, and others. It gained its independence from Great Britain in 1966 and, in 1970, became the Caribbean's sole Cooperative Socialist Republic. The decade which followed witnessed the beginning of a prolonged and serious economic decline in the country. This was triggered by economic policies that antagonised foreign investors, and was exacerbated both by an increase in oil prices and a fall in the prices of key exports--sugar, rice, and bauxite. Guyana did not begin to recover from this decline until the beginning of the 1990s when the Economic Recovery Programme began to take effect (World Bank, 1993), by which time negative growth had become ingrained in the country's economic life, inflation had risen to 65%, and the Guyanese dollar had devalued by 175%. Though rich in mineral wealth, including gold and diamonds, Guyana was then, and still remains, a poor, under-developed, debt-ridden country.

In the midst of its economic duress the country adopted education policies it could ill afford. In 1976, all privately owned schools, including those that were owned by the church, were taken over by the State. Education was declared free from nursery to university, and the State now had to shoulder all the costs. The nationalisation of education, however, was perceived as consistent with the goal of equality of educational opportunity, because it was expected to deter discriminatory practices on religious grounds and by virtue of wealth.

Primary schools in Guyana offer a six-year programme that culminates with the Secondary School Entrance Examination (SSEE). Those who are selected through this examination gain access to the prestigious general secondary schools. These schools pursue a largely academic curriculum which prepare the students for university entry or for the more rewarding jobs in the society. Those who are not selected by the SSEE attend either the Primary Schools with Tops (PwTs) or Community High Schools (CHS). The latter offer a four-year programme which is practical and vocational in orientation. The PwTs and the CHS give access only to specialised lower post-secondary programmes and their credentials are not recognised in the labour market. These schools are, in fact, regarded as "schools for failure." They cater to about 70% of the enrolled secondary school population.

The physical conditions in all schools declined during the early 1980s, and there was a shortage of textbooks and qualified teachers, many of whom migrated to the Caribbean islands where salaries and conditions of work were much more favourable. The impact on the secondary schools has been tremendous. The performance of the students in the general secondary schools at the CXCSEC was so poor that Guyana sank from being ranked third to being last among sixteen Commonwealth Caribbean countries that entered students for these examinations (Cox, 1985; World Bank, 1993).

These were some of the concerns that faced policy makers in the Ministry of Education and Cultural Development in Guyana which led them to attach urgency to the need for a study on functional literacy. The decision to focus on out-of-school youth was considered judicious in light of research which

found that illiteracy was gravest among the youth and young adults in the Caribbean, and that this was due, in large measure, to deficiencies in the education systems in the region (Jules, 1990). This is supported by Carceles (1990) who observed that between 1970-1985, illiteracy among the 14-19 age group decreased due to the increased availability of schooling opportunities. He adds, however, that “recent trends would seem to suggest a reversal of this favourable trend, for enrolments and retention of pupils are on the decline in some developing countries” (p. 452).

The survey

Out-of-school youth (OSY) were defined as persons between the ages of 14-25 who had left school and were employed or unemployed, and not undergoing any further institutionalised training.

Functional literacy was interpreted as the ability of the individual to apply skills in reading, writing, calculation, and basic problem-solving in all those activities in which literacy and numeracy are required for effective functioning in his/her own group and community. Educational policy documents in Guyana emphasise the role of schools’ curricula, particularly at the primary level, in the development of literacy and numeracy skills (Guyana, 1989, 1995). Uses of literacy were determined by an analysis of schools’ curricula up to the end of the fourth form or the tenth grade. These uses were categorised in three “domains of literacy,” drawing on the work of Wagner (1990).

METHODOLOGY

The instrument

The instrument developed by Jennings, Kellman, Clarke, and Joseph (1995) to measure functional literacy assessed achievement in the three domains, namely, document, prose, and quantitative literacy (also referred to as numeracy). The items for *document* literacy required respondents to give the kinds of information required in applications forms for jobs, passports, opening bank accounts, and so forth—that is, to write their names and addresses, and to indicate, in block letters, their gender, age, date of birth, nationality, and marital status. The *prose* literacy section of the instrument tested skills in reading comprehension, and written communication. Multiple choice items were used to test mastery of verb usage, sentence construction, and word meaning. The *quantitative* literacy or numeracy section tested the ability to do arithmetic calculations and mathematical problem-solving associated with everyday life, for example, determining the agency with the best rate for money transfers, calculating profit from sale of goods, and working out the correct change after purchase of some items.

Determining the standard for functional literacy

Wagner (1995) contends that “the traditional literacy-illiteracy dichotomy misrepresents the range or continuum of literacy abilities that are common to most contemporary societies” (p. 350). He recommends assessment of “levels of literacy” (i.e., low, moderate, high).

To determine the standard for functional literacy, the test was administered to 153 students aged 14+ to 15 in a sample of 9 secondary schools, and the performance of these children in the test established the cut-off points. Given that the test carried a maximum score of 39 points, scores of 29.9 and above (i.e., 77% and above) indicated achievement at a *high* level of functional literacy. Scores between 20.2 and below 29.9 (i.e., 51.8% to below 77%) indicated achievement at a *moderate* level of functional literacy, while scores below 20.2 signified a *low* level of functional literacy. An assumption of the study was that a *high* level of functional literacy was required for the individual to function *effectively* in his/her own group and community.

Pilot testing and administration of final test

At the time of the survey, the estimated population in the 14-25 age group was 188,220, of whom 91,992 were males and 96,228 females. This represented about 25% of the population of Guyana. The instrument was pilot tested in approximately 1% of the estimated 14-25 year old population in 4 of the 10 regions which together were considered to typically represent the entire country. Of the instruments distributed, 79% were returned in the time allotted for this phase of the exercise.

The test (both pilot and final) was administered by 93 field assistants who were mostly teachers or community leaders who knew, or were able to identify, the persons in the 14-15 age group in their respective areas.

Analyses of the pilot test revealed a reliability coefficient of 0.997 using the $K-R_{21}$ formula. Details of revisions to the instrument based on the pilot test and other details of the methodology can be seen in Jennings et al. (1995).

The final test was administered in 9 out of the 10 regions and was taken by about 2.5% of the target group. There was a little over 77% return of the instruments. The composition by gender and ethnicity of the sample was as follows: male: 1709 (53%); female: 1487 (46%); African-Guyanese: 1147 (37.2%); East Indian-Guyanese: 1173 (38%); Mixed Races: 521 (16.9%); Amerindian: 111 (3.6%); Other: 78 (2.5%). The remainder (2.5%) did not state their race.

The limitations

The main limitations of the instrument are its bias on the written mode, its lack of provision for identifying the absolute illiterates, and the fact that it does not measure achievement in the use of oral skills. The last is clearly a limitation in a society where the oral tradition is strong (Robertson, 1992). The bias on the written mode and the inclusion of prose literacy in the test reflects a similar bias and emphasis in schools' curricula. This did not seem unreasonable to the researchers, given the explicit statements in policy documents that schools' curricula are designed to develop young people who are functionally literate.

Main Findings

(1) Levels of functional literacy of the OSY

Table 3 shows that the majority of the OSY (60.6%) are moderately functionally literate. Only 11% of the OSY were able to score 29 out of a maximum of 39 marks (77%) on the test and could, therefore, be said to be achieving at a *high* level of functional literacy. That so few of the OSY achieved at this level is understandable in light of the impact on the education system of the economic, social, and political problems that the country was experiencing whilst these youngsters were in school.

For the OSY, prose literacy is their weakest area (Table 4). This has to do with their weaknesses in expression and communication of ideas in writing. A total of 53% of the OSY (mainly those between 20-25) did not attempt an exercise which required them to write freely on 'A day I will always remember.' Field assistants reported that they gave such reasons as "being too busy," "not knowing what to write," and that it was "an exercise for small children going to school." The association of writing with a "school exercise" suggests that not enough was done in school to show the relevance of writing to their everyday life. The results overall clearly show that the majority of these youngsters have weaknesses in sentence construction, punctuation, subject/verb agreement, organisation of ideas, and content relevance.

With regard to quantitative literacy, the main area of weakness lies in their understanding of the metric system. This may be due to the fact that although the schools teach the metric system, in the wider

society imperial weights and measures are still being used. What is being taught in the schools, therefore, is not being reinforced in the wider society.

(2) *Gender differences in achievement in functional literacy*

Table 5 shows that there is a highly significant relationship between gender and level of achievement in functional literacy. More females (78%) achieve at a moderate to high level than males (66.5%). This finding is not altogether surprising since Caribbean countries, in general, do not conform to the norm of higher female illiteracy rates in developing countries. Research has shown higher female literacy rates in Jamaica and St. Lucia (Miller, 1990; UNESCO, 1990).

(3) *Differences in achievement in functional literacy according to the highest level of education attained*

Table 6 shows that there is a highly significant relationship between the level of achievement in functional literacy and the level of education attained. The largest percentage (23.1) of the OSY who achieved at a *high* level of functional literacy went to the College of Education or the University of Guyana. The majority of those whose highest level of education was the general secondary schools (70.7%) and post-secondary technical/commercial institutions (66%) achieved at a *moderate* level of functional literacy, while the majority of those who achieved at a *low* level ended their formal education in the PwTs and the CHS.

These findings underscore the fact that the education offered in the PwTs and the CHS is inadequate for producing school leavers who are functionally literate. Also noticeable is the fact that 15% of the young adults who are tertiary educated achieve at a *low* level of literacy. A possible explanation for this is that *tertiary* in this study included the teachers' college as well as the technical institutes which take in students with low level entry qualifications.

Part of the problem also lies in how the teachers themselves have been trained to teach. Emphasis on the teaching of grammar in the preparation of teachers of English at the college level is reflected in English lessons, where much emphasis is also placed on the teaching of grammar and , consequently, reading and writing tend to be used mainly in activities which are aimed at practising spelling and word recognition, such as copying, word building, dictation, and so forth. Because these are all done in a vacuum, the students are not taught to see the functional uses of reading and writing in everyday life. We are reminded here of those who saw writing as a "school exercise." In the PwTs and CHS, there is a scarcity of books to meet the different interests of the students and so little is done to encourage the desire to read. In short, there is a failure to create in these schools the sort of literate environment which is not available to the students in their homes.

(4) *Differences in functional literacy according to employment status*

Jobs were categorised using a scheme based on that used by Forde (1977), with some modifications, notably, the use of separate categories for *service workers*, *semi-skilled*, and *unskilled workers*. These were defined in terms of the level of training required. Thus, the *professional and specialised* category refers to occupations requiring higher education and training in specialised skills and areas of knowledge for entry into what is normally a lifelong career. The *administrative, executive, and supervisory* category subsumes occupations requiring skills in management, implementation, and supervision for which formal higher level training is required. *Service workers* are those in occupations which require special training at the post secondary level in order to render essential services such as that provided by the armed forces. *Craftsmen/women and technicians* are those who require skills training for making products or performing essential tasks such as electrical work and plumbing. *Semi-skilled workers*

are those who acquire some training on the job, but require no special training or qualification for job entry. *Unskilled workers* have no special training or qualification and are not given on-the-job training.

Table 6 shows a highly significant relationship between employment status and achievement in functional literacy. As to be expected, the workers with the highest percentage in the *high* functional literacy level were those in the professional/specialised category, and although very few were in administrative/supervisory occupations, the majority of these (80%) were achieving at a *moderate* level of functional literacy. While most of the different categories of workers achieved at a moderate level, the percentage of those achieving at a *low* level of functional literacy was greater amongst the unskilled and the unemployed.

(5) *Differences in achievement in functional literacy according to ethnicity*

A chi-square analysis showed a significant relationship (beyond the .001 level of confidence) between ethnicity and achievement in functional literacy. It is evident from Table 7 that both the East Indian-Guyanese and the persons of Mixed Race achieve at a higher level of functional literacy than the African-Guyanese, but that the achievement of the latter surpasses that of the Amerindians and the other races (i.e., Portuguese, Chinese, Whites, etc.). The fact that, of the major races, the Amerindians had the largest percentage in the *low* level of functional literacy is indeed cause for concern, because it underscores their general state of marginalisation and the impoverishment of their condition in the hinterland regions of Guyana.

The popular tendency, however, is to see the racial issue as revolving around the African- and East Indian-Guyanese, with the African-Guyanese being perceived as being at a disadvantage. What is apparent from the analysis by Jennings (1998a), however, is that the level of achievement in functional literacy of both African- and East Indian-Guyanese depends on their socioeconomic circumstances. She reported some 40% of African-Guyanese living in the suburbs of the capital city achieving at a *high* level of functional literacy, while some 30% of East Indians who live in depressed economic communities achieve at the *low* level. Poverty of circumstances is clearly a critical variable in the achievement of literacy.

When developing countries like Guyana are credited with adult literacy rates which are almost 100%, the impression is given that problems such as those highlighted here do not exist. It thus makes it that much more difficult to harness the *political* will even to acknowledge that these problems exist and to take the necessary action to address them. The raising of questions pertaining to ethnicity uncovers sore wounds, particularly in the case of the African-Guyanese and the East Indians. In the meanwhile, the plight of the indigenous population becomes minimised. While the Amerindians benefit from a fairly sound primary education, they are severely deprived at the post-primary level. Opportunities for continuing education for those who have left school are virtually non-existent. Such literacy skills as they have acquired in school can neither be reinforced nor further developed due to the absence of a "reading culture" in their environment. There are no well stocked libraries in the hinterland that provide opportunities for them to read in English, let alone in their own languages. The important issue of whether it is best to develop the literacy of the Amerindians through their first or second language has not yet been treated with any seriousness. Forte and Melville (1989), for example, contend that classroom practices tend to instil in Amerindian children a belief that their own language is inferior, since all instruction takes place in English.

The language of a people is the visible manifestation of their soul as a unique group of individuals. Is it surprising, then, that a people whose own language is viewed as inferior and who are required to achieve in what for many of them is a foreign language should achieve at such a low level?

CHAPTER 3

For the Phoenix to Rise

Literacy as “liberation of a mind from the bondage of dependence,” as an “emancipating process” carries with it the notion of a newly won freedom, and when literacy projects are given a title such as “On the Wings of Words,” it conjures up images of a bird gliding and soaring in flight without limits. This is consistent with one of the main justifications for illiterate adults to become literate, namely, that once they become independent readers, in terms of the key to development that they would have, the sky becomes the limit.

Legend has it that there was an eagle-like bird, the phoenix, that came every 500 years from Arabia to Heliopolis where it built its nest on an altar of the sun-god, was consumed by fire, and rose again from its ashes, young and beautiful. The phoenix, thus, became a symbol of immortality and the resurrection. Adult literacy in the CC countries is in many respects like the phoenix. Many claims that are made about it are mythical (see Chapter 1). At times it has been elevated to national significance in government policy as was the case, for example, under Michael Manley in the 1970s in Jamaica, and in the short-lived regime of Maurice Bishop in Grenada (1979-83). In more recent times, however, it seems like the phoenix, to have become “consumed by fire,” Limage (1999), in an examination of the involvement of UNESCO over the years in the promotion of literacy worldwide, describes how during International Literacy Year (1990), the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) attempted to mobilise interest and commitment among the donor agencies to give greater attention to literacy/basic education. Limage contends that “the greater financial and political power of the proponents of the follow-up to this conference have, in fact, detracted attention from universal basic skills acquisition. The first victims of this dispersion of priorities have been youth and adult literacy programmes ...” (p. 76). Bhola (1998) describes how in the *Framework for Action* which encapsulates the recommendations of the WCEFA, “reduction of the adult illiteracy rate” was included. However, at the implementation stage adult education was interpreted to be a component of basic education and, thus, was dissociated from “its conceptualization as lifelong learning meant to enable citizens to participate continuously in the processes of development and democratization of their societies” (p. 492). In sum, says Bhola, “things may be much worse for adult literacy and adult education today than they were in 1990. Adult education and adult literacy have remained areas without policy support, without funds, without projects dedicated to capacity building, and without much action on the ground” (p. 493). The phoenix is indeed in the ashes.

What will it take for the phoenix to rise? This is by no means an easy question to answer, but a few suggestions follow:

(1) *More valid and reliable methods of measuring adult literacy should be used so that more accurate reporting of adult literacy rates can be made.*

Although the Functional Literacy Survey of the Out-of-School Youth (FLSOSY) did not address the entire population of Guyana, it did deal with a significant proportion of it. Some 60% of the population is age 25 and below, and given that Jennings (1998a) has shown that the achievement in functional literacy of the 14+-year olds in secondary schools is not far different from that of the OSY, it can reasonably be said that the results of the survey have highlighted the general state of functional literacy in the country among the greater percentage of its population. Given also the finding in the 1994 National Literacy Survey in Jamaica (1995) that the older the age group the lower the level of literacy, some doubt is truly cast on the official statistics on adult literacy in Guyana.

The rate--98.1%--quite likely comes from the Ministry of Education’s report on the percentage of enrolment in primary schools. As argued in the first chapter, however, this is not a reliable measure of adult literacy because a vast discrepancy exists between school enrolment and school attendance in

Guyana. The adult literacy rate in Guyana is more likely in the region of 70% and Jennings (1998a) suggests that the functional literacy rate of Guyana is in the lower 50s and that absolute illiteracy may well be over 21%. This figure is projected on the basis of the reports of field assistants who observed large numbers of young adults in certain villages who could neither read nor write, and some who had not attended school since the age of eight or nine.

Further research is evidently needed to establish the precise adult literacy/functional literacy rate in Guyana, but the general feeling amongst the population that the official statistics given for adult literacy is inaccurate cannot be ignored.

Experience in other parts of the Caribbean underscores the need for more reliable estimates of adult literacy. Anomalies in the adult literacy rates of Jamaica and Belize, for example, were highlighted earlier in this study. These apparent anomalies underscore the point made by Puryear (1995, p. 79) that “the existing international education database is far too often unreliable.” Torres (1990) cites poor measurement techniques and procedures, and even distortion for political ends, in compiling statistics as reasons for such unreliability.

For adult literacy rates to be more accurately reported, more valid and reliable measures of adult literacy need to be used. Statistics on adult literacy in the Caribbean have tended, in the past, to be a by-product of national censuses, and because these embody different understandings of what it is to be *literate*, it is not only difficult to compare literacy achievement levels from one census period to the next, it is almost impossible to compare literacy achievement across countries. CC countries, therefore, need to establish clear understandings of what is meant by literacy/illiteracy, functional literacy/functional illiteracy as well as the distinctions between *simple* and *basic* literacy. Based on such understandings, a valid and reliable measure of adult literacy needs to be developed. This is not an easy task. Rogers (1999, p. 232) refers to “the difficulty of finding common measures of achievement to satisfy national governments searching for statistics to convince the international community that they are making progress with what is seen as ‘the problem of illiteracy’.” The instrument used by Jennings et al. (1995), while it may not be perfect, could serve as a useful starting point. Important features of the instrument are: (a) it is grounded on a clear definition of functional literacy; (b) it moves away from the simplistic dichotomy of *functional literacy vs. functional illiteracy* and, instead, tests achievement levels in three categories which represent a more realistic notion of human development; and (c) it samples across the domains where literacy and numeracy functions typically are found in modern societies.

(2) *The need to recognise that illiteracy is a problem.*

It is of critical importance that realistic reports of adult literacy rates in the Caribbean be presented in international sources, because inflated rates give the impression that there really isn't a literacy problem in the region. This has implications for the funding of programmes.

The Guyana Book Foundation,² for example is no longer eligible for funding by the Canadian Organization for Development Education (CODE) on account of Guyana's reported high literacy rate. With regard to the situation in Guyana, in a private communication with the author in June 1997, an anonymous North American reviewer of an article on the literacy problem in Guyana pointed out that the average literacy rates in many Caribbean countries compared favourably with some developed countries, “therefore, why the concern about the non-literacy of the minority.” The reviewer was not convinced that Guyana had a literacy problem. The fact that its adult literacy rate approximates to that of some developed countries is no justification for a developing country not being concerned with the non-literacy of its minority. After all, many developed countries are now beginning to show concern about their own literacy problem. In Canada, for example, “headlines continue to appear about illiterate high school graduates and university students unable to write” (Willinsky, 1992, p. 273), and studies there have put illiteracy at a rate of one in every five Canadian adults. Limage (1999) describes how for years many industrialised countries were reluctant to admit that their public schools could be failing, and were unwilling to discuss

underachievement, wastage, grade repetition, drop-out of forms of failure in the same context as that of developing countries, hence they consistently reported to UNESCO negligible or no *illiteracy*. Not wanting to be put in the same boat as developing countries, “Some industrialized countries”, writes Limage (1999, p. 82), “ were also making their own distinctions with their own specific vocabulary to indicate that it was different (and perhaps less degrading) to lack sufficient basic skills if one was from an industrialized country than from a developing nation.” What all of this suggests is that the industrialised countries may not be so much more advanced (as far as adult literacy is concerned) than the developing countries, and may not be as good a yardstick for comparison as the reviewer in question would wish to make out.

The contention, moreover, is that “the non-literate minority” in Guyana (as in other CC countries) may not be as small as official statistics would have us believe. A limitation of the Functional Literacy Survey was that it did not include a systematic way of gaining information on the absolute illiterates amongst the OSY. But the field assistants were struck by the number of young men and women who could neither read nor write whom they came upon all over Guyana. An example of a typical observation made by the field assistants in their reports is as follows:

... in the back streets of this community persons were more concerned about living from day to day with little or no interest in pursuing formal education. Only about 10 homes in the back streets had all their school age members attending school. The others had either dropped out or attended school occasionally. The number of members in these homes who are unable to read/write/never attended school is terrifying. (Jennings, 1998a, p. 17)

The absolute illiterates in a society are quite adept at the subterfuges they use to disguise their state of mind, and this creates an added difficulty in attempts to quantify them. This does not make it any easier to arrive at the true state of adult literacy in a country, and this points to another difficulty that faces developing countries as they approach the year 2000--the year designated for *literacy for all* (Carceles, 1990). International funding agencies have studiously neglected literacy programmes for young people and adults since the 1970s. Jones (1997) pinpoints the uneasiness of the World Bank with the outcome of the March 1990 World Conference on Education for All at Jomtien, in which the inter-agency agreement between the UNDP, UNESCO, and UNICEF supported a dual track of primary education and adult and young people’s programmes. The World Bank favoured a focus on primary education alone and maintains a “silence on the educational prospects in later life of the hundreds of millions of persons who continue to be let down by formal primary schooling” (Jones, 1997, p. 372). The emphasis on primary education in Commonwealth Caribbean countries in the 1990s shows that, despite Jomtien, the World Bank has had its way. Because the World Bank is a major source of funding for education in the Caribbean, it is clear that unless means can be found within these countries of funding literacy programmes, the years ahead are likely to witness an increase rather than a decrease in illiteracy. Jones foreshadows this when he says:

With their fuzzy procedures and their far less controllable and predictable outcomes, and their capacities to throw open the perceptions, attitudes, and values of learners, adult literacy programs might in the long haul represent a commitment which, politically and culturally, is too risky for both Bank and borrower. (p. 374)

Researchers have attributed the state of adult literacy worldwide to the fortunes of UNESCO which, once the watchdog for literacy, has long lost its teeth. Mundy (1999, pp. 44-45) comments on the continuing deterioration of donor funding for development assistance and basic education and “ongoing decline in UNESCO’s own extra-budgeting resources for education ... such resource constraints increase the likelihood that Education for ALL will go the way of fundamental education and functional literacy

before it.” The organising themes for UNESCO prepared by the Director General in an effort to restore the organization to its role as “the moral and intellectual watchdog for the broader United Nations “ (Mundy, p. 45) do not include adult literacy. This does not augur well, given the fact that “outside UNESCO, adult literacy has at best been treated as a second-chance opportunity seriously under-resourced in the sector of adult education or parsimonious association with charitable bodies at business-sponsored activities” (Limage, 1999, p. 87).

But one is of the view that such a state of affairs should not be a source of disillusionment to us in the CC. Rather, we should see it as challenge to dispense with our *begging bowl* image wherein we are dependent on others to solve our problems. Indeed we are living in an age of globalization--of one world, one human destiny. But the question is, *whose* destiny? We need to recover *our own* destiny and take hold of it in our own hands. We need to become the champions of our own causes, our own advocates. The new millennium has to meet us devising strategies to make this possible so that we need no longer continue to be “consumed by fire” over which we can exercise little control.

(3) *Literacy preparedness for advancing technology should be a priority*

What is apparent from the findings of the case study on Guyana is that the education system of the mid- 970s and 1980s was by no means efficient in producing graduates who could function at a level of literacy required in a country which has to be capable of “technological leap frogging”(CARICOM Secretariat, 1988). Only 11% of the out-of-school youth achieved at a level of functional literacy of which one could say that *the person can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his/her group and community, and can continue to use reading, writing, and calculation for his/her own and for the community’s benefit.* It has to be borne in mind, however, that the standard at which the functional literacy test for the case study was set was tenth grade (fourth form). This is below the level of what Chall (1987) terms the “new illiterates” who, though having functional literacy, “do not yet read at a high school graduate level, one that permits problem-solving and is more functional for a technological society” (p. 75). What this suggests is the need to raise the standard for literacy in Guyana. Essentially, this means raising the standard of education in general. This is not altogether surprising since Guyana’s education system deteriorated during the 1970s and 1980s when the country’s economic problems were particularly severe. But what is said of Guyana may also apply to other CC countries. Jamaica and Grenada have consistently not fared much better than Guyana on the league table of achievement at the CXCSEC. The standard of their education may also need to be raised.

Whether the standard would need to be equated with that proposed by Chall is debatable. What is clear, however, is that more so than the older generation, it is the young people of today who have to be prepared to meet the challenges of an increasingly complex and technological world.

There is, of course, the argument that technology is advancing to the point, that in order to use it, relatively low levels of literacy will suffice, and that emerging technologies will take over certain cognitive tasks that are presently performed by humans. Thus, people with high levels of literacy are likely to be in less demand in the future (Sticht, 1987). This sort of argument pleases those who do not regard the literacy of youngsters who are out of school and adults as a priority. But it is also the case that even jobs such as clerical and secretarial work, which in the past required modest literacy skills now demand a complex range of skills to deal with the battery of electronic equipment and modes of communication in a modern office, for which higher levels of literacy are needed (Burstall, 1991; Stojkovic & Cumming, 1995). Young people who leave school with low level literacy are going to find it hard to cope in the market place, if they cannot avail themselves of opportunities to improve their literacy skills.

(4) *The need for holistic educational planning*

An obstacle to achieving educational goals in CC countries is the piecemeal approach to change. There is, thus, a tendency to focus on a particular level of education and to leave the rest for some other time. And so, we now focus on primary education because the World Bank favours this, and other international agencies are also prepared to provide funding. The reform of secondary education is also getting some attention for similar reasons, but the tertiary level, and adult and continuing education are neglected. There is a failure to recognise that when the tertiary level is neglected or under-resourced, the rehabilitation of primary schools or the building of new secondary schools, the provision of text books, new curriculum guides, and so forth, will, in the final analysis, be to no avail if the tertiary level is unable to train the teachers the schools need. If adult and continuing education is ignored, what will happen to the increasing numbers of young people whom the primary and secondary school system fail? Indeed what will happen to those in the All Age schools (senior grades) who do not have access to anything that can rightly be called *secondary education*?

We need a vision of education in the region which is holistic, in that it covers the entire educational system-- formal and non-formal, from nursery through to the tertiary level, and including adult and continuing education. We need a vision of education that recognises that all levels of the education system interlock and are interdependent, and that what happens or does not happen at any one level affects all the others.

(5) *The need to treat adult and continuing education with importance*

Why is it essential to attach the same importance to adult and continuing education as is accorded the primary and secondary systems? Carceles (1990) tells us that the number of illiterates is growing in developing countries, and that by the year 2000 little progress would have been made towards the eradication of illiteracy in large sectors of the adult population in those countries. But it is questionable whether it makes sense to talk about “the eradication of illiteracy” as if illiteracy is something that can be gotten rid of once and for all. Clearly this it not the case.

Legends are forever. Illiteracy, like the legendary phoenix, will always be with us. This is because what it is to be literate (or illiterate) will always be changing. As a society progresses, the conditions that its citizens will have to satisfy to enable them to function effectively in that society will become increasingly complex and demanding. The threshold of literacy/functional literacy will rise. Thus, Chall (1987) makes the point that the “new illiterates” have abilities and skills which are “above the average adult level of 50 years ago” (p. 75), but are still not considered prepared for a “world that continues to become more complex and requires from its workers a literacy that implies not only taking information off the page, but making inferences, reasoning critically, and the like” (p. 75). The Director General of UNESCO maintains that “... a man or woman who is perfectly literate today may become a functionally illiterate tomorrow if the process whereby such a person acquires knowledge and skills comes to a halt” (Mayor, 1990, p. 442). That process is adult and continuing education because here is where adult literacy programmes are usually located. Without such programmes, people with low levels of literacy (and those with none at all) will find themselves increasingly at risk in the years ahead, as they will have no means of improving their knowledge and skills to keep apace with the changing demands of life in an increasingly technological world.

There is a tendency, however, for the provision of such opportunities to be left to the initiative of individuals and groups in a society. Generally absent is a planned national literacy programme which is fully supported, even if not solely funded, by government. In the case of Guyana, for example, following the publication of the results of the survey described in the previous chapter, a National Functional Literacy Committee was established by the Ministry of Education, with representatives of monitoring and co-ordinating initiatives in literacy undertaken by individuals and groups in their communities. Two initiatives are worthy of note. The first is “On the Wings of Words”³--a project launched in response to an invitation, in 1994, to the local Baha’i Community by the Universal House of Justice, the Baha’i

headquarters in Israel, to take part in a literacy project targeting 10 to 16 year olds. It so happened that the period of planning for this project coincided with the publication of the results of the Functional Literacy Survey. The target group of "On the Wings of Words" is mainly in-school children.

The second initiative is the Junior High school programme organised by the Adult Education Association (AEA) of Guyana. This is a three year programme offered to school-drop outs, some of whom are as young as 12 years old. The curriculum consists of English, mathematics, social studies, science and book-keeping. The first batch of 34 students graduated in July 1999 and their results show that, given more individual attention, these youngsters whom the formal system failed are capable of achieving creditably. This programme cannot meet the demands of the large numbers of school drop-outs and the poorer families cannot afford the fee which is charged, small though it is.

While there is much disenchantment with national mass literacy programmes, since they have not in the past produced the results desired (Limage, 1999), the role that governments need to play in adult literacy programmes should not be undermined. While individuals and groups may be encouraged to mount literacy programmes, standards of literacy need to be set, methods for adult literacy need to be informed by research, and the offerings need to be monitored not only to ensure quality control but also in an effort to avoid duplication. Such things cannot be left to chance if adult literacy is indeed, as Manley (1974) maintained, important for a country seeking "to accomplish economic transformation" (p. 158). Governments have to assume some responsibility.

(4) *Adult and continuing education must cater FOR ALL*

Illiteracy is an expression of power relations in a society. The illiterate in a society are the disempowered, the voiceless, the culturally marginalised. Often they are also the poor, the minority groups, such as indigenous populations, or they are the objects of racial stereotype. They are the unskilled, the unemployed. They are the unseen and the unheard who are hidden away from social contact because their families are ashamed of their physical and mental handicaps. They are the angry young men who have been alienated by the school system which has dumped them on street corners, where they loiter and wait for opportunities for their idle hands. They are older men and women for whom life has been a struggle to keep secret their state of illiteracy and who find themselves, in the winter of their years, bemoaning their lack of accomplishment. They are the street children, bereft of their childhood, whose home is a concrete sidewalk. They are the boys and girls who labour for little in the rice fields, on the sugar plantations, in backyard industries, or peddle goods on street corners during school hours.

Education planners in CC countries rarely consider the needs of those people, and so they are denied access to the knowledge and skills to empower them in societies which have to be able to develop, control, and use new and emerging technologies. Such denial sows the seeds of disenchantment and instability in a society, and it legitimises not only poverty of circumstance but also of the mind. If we are serious about education for all, the new millennium needs to usher in education planners and policy makers with an enlarged vision of education, which embraces ALL of these persons in society and not just those who are fortunate to benefit from the formal education system. This is essential if access to knowledge through new technologies is not to be limited to the few, thereby exacerbating current inequalities based on social class, gender, and racial divisions.

(5) *The harnessing of political will*

Political will is needed to help the phoenix rise from its ashes. If priority is to be given to literacy in both the formal and non-formal system, and if this is to be embraced in a more holistic planning on the part of educational planners, this cannot be done without the support of the political directorate. Reflection on the recent history of CC countries reveals that such times where adult literacy has been brought to the forefront is when it has received the advocacy of the political leadership. When we think of the Jamaica

Movement for the Advancement of Literacy (JAMAL), we cannot help but recall the advocacy of a leader who believed that “any society that has set itself the objective of social justice based upon equality cannot tolerate substantial illiteracy” (Manley, 1974, p. 158).

Because literacy is such a highly politicised area, the role that government plays in literacy programmes has to be approached with caution. The thesis here is that government should: (a) exalt the importance of adult literacy through incorporating adult and continuing education into the overall plan for the education system in the country. This is the holistic notion of planning discussed earlier; and (b) provide support to individuals and groups who have initiated adult literacy programmes. This is support in terms of some funding (or assistance in obtaining funds), the setting of standards for literacy, advice on methods as needed, monitoring for quality control, and assistance in evaluating the impact of the programme. The role then is partly directive, but mostly supportive.

The reason for such caution is that literacy is such a powerful tool. It can be used for so many purposes. In the earlier days of the revolution in Iran, for example, literacy education was used as an agent of change to convey revolutionary ideas and to change values. In post-revolutionary Iran, however, it became openly religious and political and was directed at the Islamization and politicization of the learners (Mehran, 1992). Literacy, thus, can be used as a tool to empower or to disempower people. For this reason, the powerful elite in a society may not consider it in their interest to promote literacy programmes, because the new literates could pose serious challenges in areas where, hitherto, they had been quite complacent.

And yet governments who ignore the illiterate or persons with low levels of literacy in their society do so at their own peril, because as pointed out by Mayor (1990):

The level of education of the overall population of a particular country and the range and quality of educational initiatives within it determine that country's ability to share in world development, to avoid lagging further behind, to compensate for and regain time lost, to benefit from the advancement of knowledge and to make progress itself while contributing to the progress of others. (p. 445)

Conclusion

Because the extent of the literacy problem varies from country to country and from one environment to the next, it is essential that any initiative in literacy within a country mobilises community effort. Also necessary is a campaign which targets from the absolute illiterate to the functionally literate, and which is designed to move these people to action by creating an awareness of the implications for their continuing education of the constantly accelerating change in new technologies, and especially those related to information access. Adult and continuing education, particularly through its adult literacy programmes, has to be given a much more dynamic role in national development.

What needs to be recognised is that any society consists of persons who are at varying levels of literacy--from the absolute illiterate to those who achieve at high levels of literacy, and in between are those at the *low* and *moderate* levels. At a given point in time, a society may find it essential to concentrate its efforts on those who are absolute illiterates. When the numbers of these are diminished, the emphasis may switch to those functioning at a low level, while at another time still, a society may find that it needs to raise the level of literacy of its mostly moderately literate population, as the needs for living and working in the society demands a higher level of literacy. This is quite likely what is happening now in the industrialised countries. Of crucial importance is the need for the population in the CC countries to realise that being literate, or functionally literate, does not mean that they have arrived at some predetermined point beyond which they need not go. When the phoenix is consumed by fire, that is not its end. It rises again from its ashes. Thus the threshold for literacy is ever being renewed and extended from time to time.

A further point needs to be made here. It could be argued that literacy has been interpreted rather narrowly in this monograph, since it has been associated largely with skills of reading, writing and computation, problem-solving, and so forth, while literacy is really a much broader concept involving what Hickling-Hudson (1999, p. 39) refers to as a "range of socio-cultural competencies" and empowerment with "the skills of critique, leadership and negotiation necessary to challenge oppression." Hickling-Hudson was dealing specifically with *political* literacy that enables women to develop the self-confidence and know-how they need to challenge the economic and political practices which oppress and exploit them. This was understood in the notion of literacy as liberation and as an emancipating process referred to earlier. But apart from political literacy, there are a number of other *literacies*--scientific, cultural, artistic, technological, "media literacy," and even "multi literacies" (*A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies*, 1996). The point, however, is that achievement in any of these literacies is dependent on mastery of the skills of reading, writing, computation, problem-solving, and other generic skills. These should be the fundamental concern of adult literacy programmes even though the latter may have other objectives.

Literacy *is* liberation. This is a notion which needs to be instilled in both young and old with as much fervency as used by political leaders of the early post-independence era, who saw a literate population as indispensable to full participation in the economic and social system of a modern nation state. It is a notion which is all the more important in this era of *globalisation* where, all too frequently, it appears that our small states in the Caribbean are in danger of losing control of their destiny and, indeed, their sovereignty. Literacy as liberation discards our "begging bowl" image. It tells our young people that we do have control over our destiny, that we are not dependent on the will of others, and that we do not have to accept whatever slops are put in the bowl; that it is within our power to improve ourselves as persons or as nations as a whole. We need to convince both young and old that they do have a role to play in charting their destiny as well as the destiny of their country, and that this role is dependent on their education. We need to persuade them that their education does not end at the primary, secondary, or even at the university or college level, but that it is a continuous, life-long process to which they should become committed. It is this realisation which is symbolised in the phoenix rising from the ashes--young and beautiful--to begin a new life.

Main Recommendations

- **Recognise** that illiteracy is a problem in the region; that it is most acute amongst the youth and young adults in the society, including those who have completed formal schooling as well as school drop outs.
- **Raise** the standard of literacy (and education in general) in countries where levels of achievement in areas critical for literacy have been consistently low.
- **Arrive** at agreed definitions of literacy, illiteracy, functional literacy/illiteracy, and distinctions between such terms as simple and basic literacy, absolute illiteracy, and so forth. The understandings arrived at should be widely disseminated throughout the region to all those involved in literacy research and adult education in general.
- **Develop** more valid and reliable methods for measuring adult literacy, based on the agreed understandings outlined above. Use of such methods should enable:
 - in-country comparisons in literacy rates over time
 - cross-regional comparisons
 - international data bases to be provided with adult literacy rates which are accurate and realistic.

- **Adopt** holistic educational planning which embraces all levels of the education system, formal and non-formal, including adult and continuing education FOR ALL.
- **Utilise** strategies for tackling the problem of illiteracy which seek to:
 - curb low proficiency in the primary school output. This includes addressing:
 - methods of teaching language and literacy
 - the needs of low achievers, especially in the non-selective schools
 - attitudes of teachers and parents towards low achievers
 - meet the needs for literacy acquisition of the out-of-school youth and adults, as well as those who have been pushed out of school due to sheer economic need to earn a wage, or by the negative practices and unattractive instruction in schools. This involves giving a more dynamic role to non-formal education in the development process.
- **Ensure** the commitment of the people to education as a lifelong and continuing process so that they see the necessity of improving their level of literacy from time to time to meet the changing demands of an increasingly technological world.

Notes

1. Compared with Barbados (76.4), Bahamas (73.8), Trinidad and Tobago (73.8), Belize (74.7), Antigua and Barbuda (74.0#), Jamaica (74.8), Guyana's life expectancy in years at birth is 64.4 (#UNDP Human Development Report 1995, pp. 155-6; 1999, pp. 168-169).

2. The Guyana Book Foundation (GBF) was started by a group of volunteers in the 1980' who initiated a literacy programme called the Educational Renewal Programme (ERP). It sought to develop the literacy skills of the large numbers of students leaving primary and secondary schools unable to read or write. ERP was re-named the GBF in 1990 when the latter was launched as a limited liability company which supports library development and training, the distribution of books, the local publishing industry, and the promotion of reading generally. Initially supported by the Canadian Organization for Development Education (CODE), the latter has since withdrawn its support on the grounds that Guyana's high literacy rate renders such support no longer necessary. The GBF now depends on the support of private enterprise.

3. On the Wings of Words provides literacy classes for children between the ages of 10-16. Classes are free of cost but a small fee is paid for the reading materials and workbooks used. The project is conducted by volunteers with a small number of full-time workers. So far it has received in excess of US\$35,000 in funding from the British Partnership Scheme of the British High Commission in Georgetown, the Baha'i International Office of Social and Economic Development in Israel, Health for Humanity, the Guyana Book Foundation and CODE.

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Annexes

Table 1. Adult Literacy Rates and G.D.P. per Capita in Commonwealth Caribbean Countries

Country	G.P. per Capita ('97) (US\$)	Adult 1990	Literacy 1992	Rates 1997
Antigua & Barbuda	9,692	96	96	95
Bahamas	16,705	99	98	95.8
Barbados	12,000	99	97	97.6
Belize	4,300	95	96	75
Dominica	4,320	97	97	94
Grenada	4,864	96	98	96
Guyana	3,201	96.4	97.5	98.1
Jamaica	3,440	98.4	83.7	85.5
St. Kitts/Nevis	8,017	92	99	90
St. Lucia	5,437	93	93	82
St. Vincent & the Grenadines	4,250	84	98	82
Trinidad & Tobago	6,840	90	97.4	97.8

Note. Compiled from data in *Foundations for the Future: Human Resource Development* London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1993, pp. 63-64; UNDP Human Development Reports 1995, pp. 155-6; 1999, pp.134-136.

Table 2. Some Main Findings of Research on Literacy in the Caribbean

Researchers	Country	Some Main Findings of the Research
Adult Literacy Tutors Association (1995)	Trinidad & Tobago	Study of factors which predict literacy (area, age group, gender, religion): found that functionally literate - 77%; functionally illiterate - 15%; illiterate - 8%.
Browne, M. (1987)	St. Vincent & the Grenadines	Between 30-50% of adult population in St. Vincent could be considered functionally illiterate (UNESCO study); illiteracy in SVG characterised as a class problem.
Carrington, L. (1992)	Commonwealth Caribbean	Highlights inconsistencies and inadequacies in measures used to determine adult literacy rates and concludes that “the extent of illiteracy, basic, or functional, within the Commonwealth Caribbean cannot be accurately stated in numerical terms using the measures from which they are usually inferred” (p. 3).
Craig, D. R. (1990)	Jamaica	Illiteracy in the 15-19 age group is being replenished continuously by large numbers of functionally illiterate youths leaving school system.
Duke, J. H. (1995)	Belize	Analysis of literacy rates since 1946 showed that by 1992 Belize was described as experiencing a literacy crisis. Rates of 90 percent and more labelled “a myth.” The major role of politics in the spread of literacy has been rhetorical.
Ellis, P. A. (1990)	Commonwealth Caribbean	Analysis reveals a high percentage of functionally illiterate adults between the ages of 16-30 years, but illiteracy rates are lower among women than men.
Jennings, Z. (1998a)	Guyana	Approximately 11% of out-of-school youth between the ages of 14-25 achieve at a high level of functional literacy; females achieve at a higher level than males; significant differences in achievement in literacy according to ethnicity and highest level of education.
Jules, D. (1988)	St. Lucia	Examines adult literacy and second language learning in a bilingual society (English and Kweyol) where illiteracy is predominant in monolingual speakers and literacy campaigns in Kweyol do not exist.
Jules, D. (1990)	Commonwealth Caribbean	“Illiteracy is clearly a problem among youths and young adults and this points to deficiencies in the educational system since, especially in the case of Dominica and St. Vincent, nearly every rural community in which literacy classes are being conducted has a primary school” (p. 91).
Lalla, B. (1992)	Trinidad & Tobago	Outlines literacy deficiencies at the university level in terms of weaknesses in the comprehension and written expression

		of undergraduates.
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Researchers	Country	Some Main Findings of the Research
Miller, E. (1990)	Jamaica	Low provision of high schooling related to high illiteracy level, high provision with low literacy levels. Higher percentage of illiteracy amongst men than women. Effects of policy noticeable 20 years after they were first implemented.
Myers, S. (1989)	Jamaica	70.5% of students completing primary school are under-achieving in reading. Females have higher percentages of literacy.
Pottinger, A. (1993)	Jamaica	Profiles the typically illiterate Jamaican child as male, with limited exposure and stimulation, from a large household headed by a single parent who is unemployed or self-employed.
Riley, D. M. (1990)	Trinidad & Tobago	The literacy rate among women is approximately 90%, but the majority of illiterates overall are women.
Statistical Institute of Jamaica (1995)	Jamaica	National Literacy Survey 1994 revealed that literacy rate is 75.4%; illiteracy rate is 24%; functionally literate is 57.2%.
Thomas, L. T. (1987)	Jamaica	The Jamaica Movement for the Advancement of Literacy (JAMAL) has achieved a decline in the illiteracy rate from 40% (1970s) to 24.3% (1981).
Trinidad and Tobago. Ministry of Education (1993)	Trinidad & Tobago	Girls outperform boys at reading at both primary and secondary levels; nutrition and literate-rich-environment more important factors in successful reading performance of primary students than affluence.

Table 3. Range of Functional Literacy Abilities of OSY

Functional Literacy Level	No.	%
High (above 29.92 or 77%)	355	11
Moderate (20.21 - below 29.92) (51.8% - below 77%)	1952	60.6
Low (below 20.21 or 51.8%)	916	28.4
Total	3223	100.0

Table 4. Achievement of OSY in Domains of Functional Literacy

Domains of Functional Literacy	OSY			
	Max. Score	Mean	SD	Variance
DOCUMENT	16	12.08	2.90	8.38
PROSE	13	4.35	2.90	8.40
QUANTITATIVE	10	4.89	2.52	6.35

Table 5. Functional Literacy Levels of OSY According to Gender: Chi Square Analysis

Functional Literacy Level	Male		Female		Not Stated		Total	X ²	df	Sig
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%				
High	145	8.5	210	14	0	-	355	87.2	4	0.000
Moderate	990	58.0	953	64	9	33.3	1952			
Low	574	33.5	324	22	18	66.7	916			
Total	1709	100	1487	100	27	100	3223			

Table 6. Main Findings of the FLSOSY

Levels of Functional Literacy of the OSY According to Highest Level of Education Attained *

	N	High	N	Moderate	N	Low
Primary	26	4%	325	49.6%	304	46.4%
Secondary	200	16.2%	874	70.7%	163	13.1%
Techn/Com	70	16.4%	282	66%	75	17.6%
Community High	19	2.8%	361	53.9%	290	43.3%
Tertiary	37	23.1%	99	61.9%	24	15.0%

Note. * 56 missing cases; 18 did not state education status.

$X^2 = 456.5$ $df = 10$ $p > 0.0000$

Functional Literacy of OSY According to Employment Status #

	N	High	N	Moderate	N	Low
Profession/Specialist	36	21.8%	108	65.5%	21	12.7%
Admin./Supervisory	2	13.3%	12	80%	1	6.7%
Service	49	20.7%	163	68.8%	25	17.2%
Crafts/Technical	13	14%	64	68.8%	16	17.2%
Semi-skilled	45	16.2%	195	70.1%	38	13.7%
Unskilled	31	8.6%	221	61%	110	30.4%
Unemployed	159	11.3%	875	62%	375	26.6%

Note. # 644 did not state employment status .

$X^2 = 291.9$ $df = 14$ $p > 0.0000$

Table 7. Ethnic Differences in Functional Literacy of OSY in Guyana

Functional Literacy Level	HIGH		MODERATE		LOW		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
RACE	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Afro-Guyanese	125	10.9	696	60.7	326	28.4	1147
Indo-Guyanese	155	13.2	762	65.0	256	21.8	1173
Mixed	55	10.6	343	65.8	123	23.6	521
Amerindian	7	6.3	70	63.1	34	30.6	111
Other	7	12.5	29	51.8	20	35.7	56
Not Stated	5	6.4	27	34.6	46	59.0	78
Total	354		1927		805		3086*

Note. * 137 missing cases