

**Education without borders**  
**Speech H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands**  
**Volkshochschultag 2011**  
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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to one of the largest European conferences in the field of adult education. In this inspiring room filled with so many adult education experts, I'd like to share some of my thoughts on the challenges we face in the area of literacy, centred around two notions:

- 1) making literacy more relevant as a socio-economic issue, and
- 2) the literacy chain.

I look at these challenges with several hats: as Chair of the Reading & Writing foundation I initiated 7 years ago in the Netherlands; as Special Envoy on Literacy and Development for UNESCO and as chair of the High Level Group on Literacy for the European Commission. Three hats, but one mind and heart when it comes to this issue I feel so strong about that I have been working on for many years.

But first, let me take you back to 2006, to the Frankfurter Buchmesse – the international conference on literacy to be more precise (called LitCam, as many of you know). After speaking at the opening ceremony, I had the privilege of meeting a group of formerly illiterate people. One man told me how much it meant to him to be invited to the Buchmesse. Being invited to the largest book fair in the world, meant literally an entry ticket to another world... the world of literates. A world that he had feared for so long. A world he felt excluded from; a world beyond reach. His feelings, and those of many others, remind me time and time again that literacy is about much more than the technique of reading and writing. It's about self-esteem, happiness and feeling included. It is these life stories that drive me during all the years that I have worked on illiteracy – in the Netherlands, across Europe and internationally.

So literacy is about empowerment and gains for individuals, communities and societies. Literacy is a precondition to achieving our society's ambitions on competitiveness, healthy living, sustainability, social inclusion and active citizenship. You and I know this and probably even find this common sense. You and I live by this conviction every day and are determined to do something about it.

And indeed, all efforts are commendable, especially since we know that this is not a "quick fix" issue. Breaking the vicious circle of shame and taboo, and reaching the right people takes time. By nature I am someone of a glass being half-full... but I am starting to feel different as of late. You may know the feeling – despair about not reaching more adults; about too many children leaving school with reading and writing difficulties. And I'm disappointed with how long it takes for the issue to be truly on the political agenda....in the Netherlands, it took a decade.

The figures support these worries: in less than two years time, the UN Literacy Decade comes to an end. Its goal was to contribute to the 50% reduction worldwide of adult illiteracy. The way it looks now, we're not likely to reach more than 34% in the regions with the highest illiteracy rates. To date, we're still looking at nearly 760 million functionally illiterate adults across the world; and some 80 million across Europe.

- Here in Germany, 12.000 people annually go back to school to learn to read and write...
- In the UK around the 3 million people gained the national level of reading and writing.
- In the Netherlands nearly 110.000 people are practicing their skills through the special website Read and Write. But only 12.000 adults take a reading and writing course through formal adult education routes. Surely, we can do better than that, if these numbers are only a fraction of the actual numbers. In Europe today, we're still looking at 7 – 25 % of the adult populations with low reading and writing skills. I used to call this an uncomfortable reality.... to be honest I am starting to feel a sense of collective shame. I'm ashamed that we have not managed to put this right. We can only turn the tide when we individually and collectively put our minds to it.

We have to look at ourselves in the mirror and admit that we cannot go on as “business as usual”. We need to do more, with less resources. We need to step up efforts, with renewed energy and dynamics in our shared mission on literacy. It’s needed everywhere – here in Germany, in other European Member States and across the globe. The question is: how? Let’s focus on Europe.

There are several aspects to the answer. I would like to focus on two: showing the relevance of literacy and addressing the literacy chain to work on both prevention and reduction of illiteracy.

**First, relevance.**

Literacy transforms individuals, communities, entire social structures and societies. We all know the stories of farmers who discover that they can get better prices for their crops once they learn how to read and write. We know of newly literate adults who open bank accounts and are finally able to better manage their money. Literate mothers are more able to look after their own health and that of their children...

It is by demonstrating the benefits of literacy to all kinds of *other* areas of our social participation and economic activity that we create a demand for literacy. Companies need more skilled workers, Ministers of Finance need literate citizens to pay taxes, Ministers of health and health professionals need literate people get a return on their investment in healthcare and the same goes for social workers. Environmentalists need literate citizens to get their support for environmental regulations....to name just a few examples....

By showing how relevant literacy is, others have no choice but to take co-ownership. This will hopefully lead to greater and more sustainable investments in literacy efforts. And it may help avoid short-term reflexes on investing in education at a time of crisis.

So what to do? A few concrete suggestions:

1. On the basis of existing knowledge, we have plenty of arguments on why illiteracy should sit at the heart of the societal and political agenda. We know that:
  - a. literacy is the key predictor for public health
  - b. literacy is one of the most important predictors of criminality
  - c. people who lack literacy and numeracy skills have greater risks to have large debts
  - d. reading and writing in the early childhood years determine a child's future at school and other behavior.
  - e. people with low literacy skills will experience much more problems in finding a job.

That said, we need to know more. The more data we can gather from a European perspective on the opportunities lost or created by investing in literacy, the better. That is one of the things we are also doing within the High Level Group on Literacy for the European Commission. Any thoughts from you are very welcome!

2. We need to engage a variety of players in society, also (especially) from outside the educational sector. Policy-makers, politicians, business leaders ... decision-makers who may not think at first glance that literacy is of their concern. But in my experience, with the right arguments, it is hard *not* to see and take one's responsibility. But it is up to us to make people see this!
3. We need to have a fresh look at why not all policies were successful, examine why this was the case and draw lessons for the future.

## Literacy chain

This brings us to the second challenge we face: addressing literacy among adults in the context of the so called literacy chain. We should view literacy starting from birth. If we think about it logically, adult learning is inextricably linked with preventing children from becoming illiterate. Put differently, to invest in children is to give them a chance in life to succeed when they are adults. A child raised by literate parents has a higher chance of personal development and success and of becoming an active citizen. If you want to educate a village, educate the mothers.

The notion of the literacy chain goes beyond formal education. Why? Because a learner is also an employee, a voter and a consumer. Someone's environment provides unlimited learning chances, although we cannot take learning for granted. Not putting them to good use means lost opportunities. So we need it all: early childhood development, universal primary education, secondary and vocational education and adult learning and creating literate environments.

To make this a reality, we need to work together and not be tempted to compete for attention and funding among different parts of the literacy chain. What we do in one area strengthens the success in another. Taking the literacy chain as our starting point, we should also accept that our work is never-ending.

So how do we put the notions of relevance and literacy chain into practice, and what does this mean for your work on adult learning?

- We need to scale up our impact by creating a snowball effect that makes others co-owners of the fight against illiteracy.
- We have the supply of expertise, data and best practices, now we need to create a sustainable demand for literacy solutions.
- We need to involve the “non-converted”, namely decision-makers and influencers in all relevant areas – from health and development to financial management to explain the relevance of learning and literacy to *their* work. The same goes for civil society organizations and companies. They need to understand that by investing in literacy, there's a greater chance of success in their respective areas

of responsibility. We need to convince them on the basis of clear evidence and solid arguments.

- Since illiteracy is not a “quick fix” issue, we need a sustained approach, where we all work together and keep focused on what we want to achieve.
- Specifically in Europe, we have the opportunity to create new momentum through the work of the European High Level Group set up at the initiative of Commissioner Vassiliou. Our mandate is to look at the issue from a societal perspective.

The underlying notion to all this is of course the importance of literacy to people themselves; literacy brings a greater sense of dignity and self-esteem, enhanced respect of others, an ability to take control of one’s life and a greater desire to participate in society. This is exactly what I saw in the eyes of this former illiterate I met in Frankfurt in 2006 and those of many others.

As the 16th century Dutch philosopher Erasmus puts it: *literacy is a mindset*. Investing in literacy is about investing in human capital, societal capital and about the future of our world. It’s about creating opportunities for men and women, teenagers and children... People with emotions and, more often than we think, with huge potential.

Don’t get me wrong. Despite my sense of despair, I remain convinced that the glass is half full. Let’s join hands in eradicating illiteracy at all ages, in all shapes and forms. I commend you on your hard work; you have my support!

Thank you.

*12 May 2011 (final)*