

REPORT OF THE SIXTH EUROPEAN CONFERENCE OF
DIRECTORS OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS
HELD IN BLED (YUGOSLAVIA) 9-12 OCTOBER 1990

LITERACY AND BASIC EDUCATION IN EUROPE ON THE EVE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

EDITED BY
PAUL BÉLANGER, CHRISTIANA WINTER & ANGELA SUTTON

UNESCO
UNESCO INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION – HAMBURG
COUNCIL OF EUROPE – STRASBOURG

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ON THE EVE OF THE 21ST CENTURY**

EUROPEAN MEETINGS ON EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Part A:

Reports of Educational Research Symposia, Colloquies, and Workshops
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Part B:

European Conferences of Directors of Educational Research Institutions
organised in cooperation with UNESCO, the UNESCO Institute
for Education in Hamburg, and the Council of Europe

PART B: VOLUME 29

UNESCO
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SWETS & ZEITLINGER B.V. AMSTERDAM / LISSE

SWETS & ZEITLINGER INC. BERWYN, PA

PUBLISHING SERVICE

The points of view, selection of facts and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily coincide with the official positions of UNESCO, the UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg, or the Council of Europe's Council for Cultural Co-operation.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

European Conference of Directors of Educational Research Institutions (6th : 1990 : Bled, Slovenia)

Literacy and basic education on the eve of the 21st century : report of the sixth European Conference of Directors of Educational Research Institutions, Bled (Yugoslavia), 9-12 October 1990 /edited by Paul Bélanger, Christiana Winter, Angela Sutton.

p. cm. -- (European meetings on educational research ; v. 29. Part B, European conferences of directors of educational research institutions organised in cooperation with UNESCO, the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg, and the Council of Europe)

At head of title: UNESCO, UNESCO Institute for Education -- Hamburg, Council of Europe--Strasbourg, Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 90 265 1264 3

1. Literacy--Europe--Congresses. 2. Fundamental education--Europe--Congresses.

3. Education--Research--Europe--Congresses. I. Bélanger, Paul. II. Winter, Christiana. III. Sutton, Angela. IV. Unesco Institute for Education. V. Council of Europe. VI. Title. VII. Series: European meetings on educational research ; v. 29.

LC156.A2E97 1992

302.2'244'094--dc20

92-27540

CIP

CIP-gegevens Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag

Literacy

Literacy and basic education in Europe on the eve of the 21st century : report of the sixth European conference of directors of educational research institutions, Bled (Yugoslavia) 9-12 October 1990 / ed. by Paul Bélanger, Christiana Winter, Angela Sutton. -- Amsterdam [etc]: Swets & Zeitlinger. (European meetings on educational research ; ISSN 0924-0578; vol. 29. Pt. B) -- Met lit. opg.

ISBN 90-265-1264-3 geb.

NUGI 724

Trefw.: taalonderwijs ; Europa.

Typesetting: Athmer SKP, Utrecht

Printed in the Netherlands by Offsetdrukkerij Kanters B.V., Alblasserdam

Cover printed in the Netherlands by Casparie IJsselstein

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ISBN 90 265 1264 3

ISSN 0924 0578

NUGI 724

Foreword

We are glad to present the report of the Sixth European Conference of Directors of Educational Research Institutions on Literacy and Basic Education in Europe on the Eve of the 21st Century.

A synthesis of the conference presented by the general rapporteur Dr. Clare Burstall follows the preface.

We have added a conclusion commenting on the three prevailing themes of the conference: the development of new perspectives of analysis in its domain, the current discussion concerning literacy evaluation, and the difficult issue of quality versus access.

Paul Bélanger
Director
Unesco Institute for Education

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Italy

Researches on Literacy in Italy

Prof. Aldo Visalberghi

One of the most important issues in the research on literacy is how to reach an agreement on the meaning of this concept. The way we discriminate between who is literacy and who is not depends upon how we define literacy: do we consider literacy as a minimal ability or as the complex of skills required for a full participation in the process of society (school, work, social life)?

The real problem is the difficulty of operationalizing this more complex and comprehensive concept of literacy. One definition of literacy was given by Williams S. Gray in 1956 who stated that “a person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group” (Gray 1956, p. 24.) But the difficulty of assessing literacy in these functional terms is one of the main reasons why literacy has been measured as the capacity of a person to sign, or in terms of school years he has attended to. It is only recently that in Italy there has been an effort to operationalize a functional concept of literacy in order to be able to assess it as the general capacity of a person to interact with society and culture.

Once an agreement has been reached over what we mean by literacy, the second issue is how to define the extension of the concept to different parts of the population.

In Italy the problem of literacy has been considered for a long time as a matter concerning adult education. Nowadays it seems that there is a need to extend the field and to focus on the school context for an accurate scientific understanding of literacy.

Nevertheless in Italy a large number of adults are totally illiterate (1,572,526 over 15 years old) and a substantial number of people, about 5,500,000, do not achieve the primary-school certificate (5th grade). There are few projects designed for this group and those that there are only reach a small percentage of people and have a very low level of success. Figure 1 shows the enrolment rates of literacy schools for adults as organized in Italy. The number of courses is small and is tending to decrease. The number of people participating is also decreasing.

Figure 1

<i>years</i>	<i>courses</i>	<i>students enrolled</i>	<i>students passed</i>
1982-83	677	7.052	4.912
1983-84	713	8.016	5.053
1984-85	621	6.973	4.229
1985-86	547	6.099	3.209
1986-87	519	6.115	3.106

A second kind of intervention in the field of adult literacy are the experimental courses for workers that have been established and organized by the Ministry of Education to allow the raising of the cultural standards of workers as provided in the collective contract. Courses are a minimum length of 350 hours altogether. Workers are entitled to 150 hours of release from work, paid by the employer (and for this reason they are called 150 hours courses). At the end of the courses students take the compulsory school exam. The attendance to the courses has been enlarged to all unemployed adults.

Also in this case, as we can see in fig. 2, the number of participants in these courses is decreasing, but the courses are far from covering the need they respond to, since the people without the 8th grade licence are in Italy more than 50% of population. As we note in tab. 1, in 150 hours courses the percentages of people who reach the licence is higher than in literacy courses but is still low.

With respect to literacy at school level the research shows that, in many countries there is a clear difference between what the school system certifies and what pupils achieve, therefore for our country it is reasonable to state that the problem of illiteracy is essentially a problem of educational achievements. If we consider now the problem of literacy inside the school system, the problem is to check if the school levels correspond to a certain standard of literacy. In Italy we have not yet a centre for the assessment of educational progress, even if the Ministry has an

Figure 2

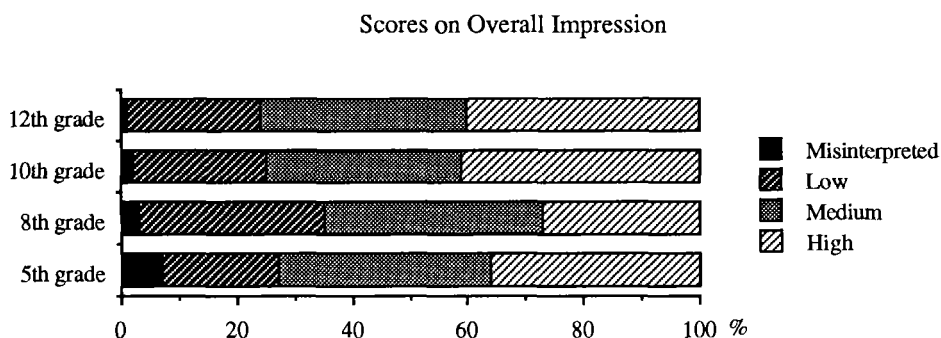
years	courses	number of enrolled	number of promoted
1982-83	5.344	101.492	79.569
1983-84	4.784	91.415	72.188
1984-85	4.536	84.780	67.194
1985-86	4.318	80.479	63.267
1986-87	4.403	73.197	59.640

advanced project in this area. Nevertheless we can use the data of some researchers to make some hypothesis of the efficiency of the school system in terms of increasing literacy.

The results of IEA Written Composition research show that a relevant percentage of Italian students of the four target groups (5th, 8th, 10th and 13th grade) are clearly below the standard of writing that teachers and experts consider adequate for that school level. Figure 3 shows the results of IEA Written composition research in the four groups. The primary school reaches a satisfactory level for 68.6% of pupils; in the 8th grade the number of students that achieve a medium or high level in writing decreases to 63.75%; at the end of the 10th grade this number slightly increases (69.15%), and in the 12th grade reaches 76%, but this is due to a large percentage dropping out than to the efficiency of our school system.

The Written Composition research shows also that the difficulties that pupils encounter in writing and reading cannot be reduced to a problem of skills but are rather a problem of global experience. It clearly comes out that the difficulties of

Figure 3 Percentages of Achievement Levels



our students are to be ascribed not to grammar or spelling but to their poor ability to choose and organize matter. Our data also show us that the motivation of the students tends to decrease as they proceed through school.

The starting point of a new approach to literacy is defining literacy standards for different levels of age and grade. This is the main goal of IEA Study on Reading Literacy. In Italy we are working to see if it is possible to extend the approach and the instruments elaborated by the IEA Study on Written Composition and by the IEA Reading Literacy Study to assess the level of literacy in different contexts.

The main project is related to the possibility of measuring the level of literacy in a sample of 19-year-olds. This research will be done, with the help of the Ministry of Defence, during the medical and psychological exams for candidates for enrolment in army. This sample has particular relevance because in Italy it is the only way to test all those persons who left school before the end of compulsory schooling (8th grade). This group includes all 19-year-old males and it is possible to assess also the relevant number of students that enrolled in the regional vocational school system after their compulsory schooling had ended.

The second aim of this study is linked to the goal of assessing the level of reading literacy of adults that are participating in a special programme called "150 hours", which helps them to take the 8th grade examination, and a sample of students attending regional vocational schools for nurses. The results of this pilot study on a selection of 7 passages from the IEA Reading Literacy Pilot Instruments is interesting because it shows that the nurses and "150 hours" students, taken together, perform below the level of a student of the 8th grade. We may expect a similar result for the workers who have in the past completed the "150 hours" programme. One might suppose that experience in life would help simple reading tasks, but the sample of nurses was 95% persons who had completed the 10th grade and 36% of people who had completed a secondary school diploma (12th or 13th grade); moreover these people needed a good level of literacy for their profession.

Figure 4

	<i>N. item</i>	<i>8th grade mean</i>	<i>nurses mean</i>	<i>150 hours mean</i>
Passage 1	7	4.73	4.04	4.41
Passage 2	5	3.17	3.65	3.29
Passage 3	6	5.38	3.90	3.34
Passage 4	4	3.19	2.67	2.83
Passage 5	8	4.77	5.49	4.89
Passage 6	5	2.63	2.24	3.10
Passage 7	5	1.91	1.62	1.94
	40			
mean		25.78	23.61	23.80