

LATIN AMERICA - Education: Reading, Writing and Then What? (by Patricia Grogg, IPS)

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IPS - María del Carmen Cervantes has learned to read the mysterious signs she couldn't decipher before, and now she wants to "go on reading and studying," a goal that is not always possible for recently literate adults in Latin America, because of deficiencies in the literacy programmes.

Cervantes was one of the first to benefit from the literacy programme using the Cuban method "Yes, I Can!" in Michoacán, a southwestern Mexican state with a population of 3.9 million people and an illiteracy rate of 12.6 percent.

"We have been teaching literacy in Mexico since the 1940s, but we keep producing illiterate people because we teach reading and writing and that's it, we stop there," Professor Ángel Heredia Mena of the José María Morelos Institute of Education Sciences in Michoacán told IPS.

Heredia Mena said that the National Institute for Adult Education (INEA) takes newly literate students who want to continue their primary and even secondary education. "But many people can't get to the Institute, and they fall by the wayside, at the risk of forgetting all they've learned," he said.

María de Jesús Morales, education officer in the Michoacán municipality of Peribán de Ramos, where 1,689 people have received literacy training, admitted that "the INEA doesn't have the staff it needs to teach the number of students referred to it."

"That's why we're trying to create the conditions to keep these people from falling behind, and so that they can complete a primary school education. We are also recruiting people for secondary education," Morales told IPS.

The issue was debated at a Jun. 5-9 international seminar on literacy and post-literacy policies and programmes, organised by the Cuban ministry of Education, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and other institutions in Havana.

"There is no magic solution. Ways and means must be explored within the context of each country, according to what each can offer," said María Luisa Jáuregui, a literacy specialist with UNESCO, in response to the concern about the continuity of post-literacy education.

In her expert opinion, following up on literacy programmes is a problem that "is to be found everywhere," not just in Mexico, although there are different options, among them the opportunity to enter adult education programmes in other countries.

Hence, one of the strategic aims of the Regional Education Project for Latin America and the Caribbean (PRELAC) is to "flexibilise formal education systems," so that newly literate people can join, for example, primary and secondary night school systems, she said.

"We are teaching literacy to our social services students, but my proposal goes beyond that. We want to encourage reading habits by taking mobile libraries out to rural communities, and then holding meetings once a month to discuss the books they have read," said Heredia, who is head of the cultural and educational extension department in Michoacán.

So far only Venezuela has implemented a massive follow-up programme in the wake of a mass literacy

campaign that benefited 1,482,000 adults. Venezuelan experts have said that thanks to “Mission Robinson 2,” over a million people will be able to complete their primary education in the coming months.

In late 2005, UNESCO’s Education For All Global Monitoring Report recognised that only 80 percent of children entering primary school reach the final grade, while one-fifth of the world’s adult population continues to be deprived of the right to read and write.

During the seminar, the director of the UNESCO office in Cuba, Herman van Hooff, pointed out that the estimated number of illiterate adults in 2004 was over 771 million worldwide, 64 percent of them women, and it is predicted that in 2015 there will still be 764.4 million people unable to read and write, of whom 63 percent will be women.

In Latin America, where 39 million people are illiterate, high levels of inequality make matters worse. Countries like Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti and Nicaragua, where the adult literacy rate is below 80 percent, will have the greatest difficulty in meeting the goals of “education for all” by 2015.

These goals, adopted in the World Declaration on Education for All in Indonesia in 1990, and amplified at the World Education Forum in Senegal in 2000, include universal primary education, a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy, and achieving gender parity by 2005 and gender equality by 2015 in primary and secondary education.

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted by the international community in 2000, include two of the above-mentioned targets, on universal primary education and gender equality by 2015.

But plans for mass education alone cannot solve the problem, unless education systems are also of high quality, which is another issue being debated at the regional level, according to César Guadalupe, regional adviser to UNESCO’s Institute of Statistics.

Guadalupe said that the new focus of the discussion was assessing whether education systems meet the needs of today’s world, appropriate to people’s lifestyles, and effective with respect to their objectives as well as efficient in their use of public funds. “It’s no accident that the problem of illiteracy is more serious in countries like Guatemala, Honduras or Nicaragua, where less than 80 percent of people aged 15 to 19 finish primary school, and in some cases less than 70 percent,” the expert said.

Neither, in his view, is it “accidental that illiteracy is not a problem in Cuba, where all children complete primary school, and the system does not keep churning out illiterate people,” in contrast to countries where the illiteracy rate falls, but the system keeps producing new young illiterate people, because they are not guaranteed a proper education.

Furthermore, “an education system can only be high quality if it is equitable, there is no other way. Equality is fundamental to what we do, and we must ask ourselves if all children are finishing school on an equal basis, or whether there are inequality problems between the urban and rural population, the lower income and more affluent populations, or indigenous and non-indigenous people,” Guadalupe added.

UNESCO statistics indicate that in Bolivia, for example, the urban literacy rate stands at 91 percent whereas the rural rate is 75 percent. And in Ecuador, where the national average for adult literacy is 91 percent, among indigenous communities it amounts to only 72 percent.

The Cuban literacy training method, with which people can learn to read and write in just three months, incorporates the principle that newly literate students should continue their studies at least until they have finished primary education.

This year Bolivia launched a mass literacy campaign to teach more than one million people to read and write, using the “Yes, I Can!” programme, which has been implemented successfully in over a dozen countries, and placed at UNESCO’s disposal by the Cuban authorities.

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