Literacy in UNESCO's Fundamental Education Program*

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Abstract

This article examines and discusses the topic of literacy within the Basic Education Program (1946-1958) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin's theories, the theoretical analysis centers on his conception of *utterance* as a guiding framework. Employing documentary research, the focus lies on analyzing documents authored by UNESCO's directors-general and specialists commissioned for organizational studies. It challenges the position of literacy within the program, delving into controversies surrounding the formulation of guiding principles to be followed by UNESCO, its educational viewpoint, the idea of fundamental education, and the positioning of literacy within this framework while scrutinizing the so-called ideal concept behind UNESCO's global educational initiatives. The conclusion highlights that the integration of literacy campaigns into UNESCO's educational agenda stemmed from a shift in its perception, emphasizing its instrumental nature and the ongoing need for educators to advocate for literacy across diverse age groups, resisting its reduction to a merely mechanistic and purely functional aspect.

Keywords

Fundamental Education Program – UNESCO – Functional literacy – International policies.

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Introduction

This excerpt, a segment of documentary research funded by CNPq, aimed to investigate international literacy policies and their evolution into national policies from 1946 to 1961, with the primary objective of scrutinizing literacy within the framework of the Fundamental Education Program (1946-1958) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Initially, the focus lies on the controversies surrounding the formulation of principles to be followed by UNESCO and its educational viewpoint. Next, it delves into the concept of fundamental education, probing how literacy fits within the program to, finally, discuss the most suitable concept to steer UNESCO's global educational endeavors.

It is worth noting that at the time of writing this article, no Brazilian articles, theses, or dissertations analyzing literacy were found regarding this specific program by UNESCO. In our exploration of international literature on the subject, particularly in English and Spanish, we found Jens Boel's article *UNESCO's Fundamental Education Program, 1946–1958: vision, actions, and impact*, featured in the book *A History of UNESCO: Global Actions and Impacts*. As per the title, its objective is to analyze the vision of fundamental education, the program's actions, and their impacts. His objective somewhat differs from our intention, which consists of analyzing literacy and the Fundamental Education Program.

Our theoretical framework draws from Mikhail Bakhtin's contributions, particularly his concept of *utterance*, to assist and guide us in our problematization. According to Bakhtin (2003, p. 371), there are no standalone utterances or speech productions since "[...] it always assumes preceding and subsequent utterances. No utterance can exist in isolation as the initial or final one. It solely functions as a link within a chain, and outside of that sequence, its analysis is unattainable."

Thus, the utterance (oral, written, visual, etc.) invariably constitutes a response, stemming from ongoing dialogues in the present, shaped by past discursive productions, and anticipates responses to potential future utterances. Bakhtin (2003), therefore, posits the utterance as a link within a chain, intricately connected to its antecedent and subsequent counterparts. Viewed as such, the utterance forms part of a larger discursive continuum and, apart from this context, it loses its significance, relegated to a mere abstract unit detached from the dialogical framework that engendered it. We employed documentary research methodology, examining documents featuring utterances from the early leaders of UNESCO, as well as researchers commissioned to conduct studies pertinent to the organization.

The utterances crafted by UNESCO that supported the Fundamental Education Program corresponded to those generated globally concerning the imperative requirement for universal education provision. However, these responses aren't bereft of the vested interests and perspectives on education, humanity, and society held by their creators, consequently suffused with underlying intentions. The utterances formulated by individuals within UNESCO during the inception and execution of the Fundamental Education Program, perceived as responses, operated within a context rife with conflicts and diverse intentions. They aimed to persuade not only member countries but the entire

global community that the program's solutions post-World War II were best suited to foster mutual understanding among nations, peace, and international security.

Our research methodology centered on documentary analysis, engaging with documents and utterances sourced from the UNESCO Digital Library (UNESDOC), authored by UNESCO's leadership and experts commissioned by the organization for studies.

It is crucial to note that UNESCO, as a constituent body of the United Nations (UN), was established during the tenth plenary session of the London conference presided over by Ellen Wilkinson on November 16, 1945. The formal signing of UNESCO's Constitution also occurred at this conference. Its *Preamble*, which remains unchanged to this day, asserts that the "[...] dissemination of culture and education for justice, freedom, and peace is essential for human dignity, constituting a sacred duty that all nations must uphold, fostering mutual assistance and concern" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 20). Hence, UNESCO undertook the responsibility of *combating global ignorance*, recognizing low levels of education worldwide as the primary cause of humanity's challenges.

Controversies surrounding UNESCO's principles and educational viewpoint

Utterances bear authorship (that is, one or more authors), representing the axiological stances of their creators amidst the diverse coexisting global perspectives. Therefore, authors navigate a world steeped in values, seeking those aligning with or challenging their own, thereby rearranging their constellation of surrounding values to give purpose to their ideas. Within this context, an utterance "reflects the standpoint of a speaker within a discourse, the values they uphold [...] and which reciprocally shape their social and ideological identity" (Charaudeau; Maingueneau, 2004, p. 393).

In his work titled *UNESCO its purpose and its philosophy*, Julian Huxley (1946), UNESCO's first director-general[2], highlighted the need for defining a philosophy to support the approach to educational quandaries and UNESCO's endeavors. It is notable that the *Corrier*, in 1976, released excerpts from the text under the title *A Philosophy for UNESCO: selections from a forgotten historical document*[3]. As per the publication's editor, the complete text, released just before UNESCO's establishment, sparked controversy due to its perceived anti-religious slant. Consequently, both the Preparatory Commission and the First General Conference of UNESCO declined to endorse it. Nevertheless, despite the controversy, Julian Huxley's tenure as the inaugural director-general wielded significant influence over UNESCO's early principles and operational strategies.

In his 1946 text, Huxley outlined potential philosophical stances for UNESCO, emphasizing what the organization "*should not*" embody in its principles and philosophy. Therefore, through negation, UNESCO aimed to define what it "*should steer clear of*,"

2- His pivotal role as the Executive Secretary of the UNESCO Preparatory Commission allowed him to shape the organization's foundational viewpoint.

3- Huxley (1976) expressed that the text served as a tool to systematize his own thoughts during the period when he assumed the role of Secretary of the UNESCO Preparatory Commission due to health-related issues faced by Alfred Zimmern.

acknowledging the presence of diverse, often conflicting, complementary, or in contention religious, political-economic, and philosophical currents worldwide.

The director-general highlighted that religious affiliations (Islam, Roman Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, Buddhism, etc.) and political-economic doctrines (variants of capitalist free enterprise, Marxist communism, semi-socialist planning, etc.) could *not* align with UNESCO's ethos. Embracing any of these would entail *taking a biased stance*, contradicting its essence as an international body and practically resulting in diminished influence and cooperation from many countries in advancing its projects.

Likewise, Huxley (1946) asserted that UNESCO should *not* adopt philosophical standpoints rooted in existentialism, vitalism, rationalism, spiritualism, etc. As the organization prioritized democracy, principles of human dignity, and mutual respect, it could not endorse perspectives that prioritize state interests over individual rights, *nor* could it subscribe to the notion of inherent superiority or inferiority among races, ethnic groups, or nations.

Faced with the impossibility of embracing existing religious, political-economic, and philosophical principles, Huxley (1946) acknowledged that:

> Its main concern is with peace and security and with human welfare, in so far as they can be subserved by the educational, scientific, and cultural relations of the peoples of the world. Accordingly, its outlook must, it seems, be based on some form of humanism. (Huxley, 1946, p. 7)[4].

The director-general emphasized that UNESCO's humanism *ought to be* global, encompassing all individuals worldwide and ensuring equality among them. Additionally, it *should be* rooted in science, recognizing its pivotal role as the material foundation for culture and necessitating its integration into practical life. Finally, UNESCO's humanism, from Huxley's (1946) perspective, *should be* evolutionary as opposed to static and ideal humanism. Such humanism

> [...] it not only shows us man's place in nature and his relations to the rest of the phenomenal universe, not only gives us a description of the various types of evolution and the various trends and directions within them, but allows us to distinguish desirable and undesirable trends, and to demonstrate the existence of progress in the cosmos. And finally, it shows us man as now the sole trustee of further evolutionary progress and gives us important guidance as to the courses he should avoid and those he should pursue if he is to achieve that progress. (Huxley, 1946, p. 8).

Originating in the Middle Ages, humanism laid the groundwork for contemporary cultures. In this context, the director-general's choice is, in a way, expansive—it fosters dialogue among various philosophical and scientific perspectives as well as political-economic doctrines that acknowledge the central position of humans in nature. Abbagnano (1995) outlines two meanings of humanism:

4- Huxley was a humanist, scientist (biologist), and a thinker. His text was not approved, according to Huxley himself (1976), because the humanist attitude expressed in it made the delegates mistakenly deem it anti-religious and that its liberalism had a communist character.

> I) a literary and philosophical movement that emerged in Italy in the second half of the 14th century, disseminating across Europe and constituting the basis of modern culture; II) any philosophical movement rooted in human nature or concerning the boundaries and concerns of humanity. (Abbagnano, 1995, p. 518).

Huxley (1946) conveyed the profound value of humanity and a commitment to comprehending individuals within their natural and historical contexts. He advocated for UNESCO's exploration of themes intricately tied to human existence, aiming to enhance living conditions. This perspective resonates with Huxley's (1946) conceptualization of education, which he regarded as a pivotal element in shaping a renewed human being and society. He envisioned education, in its *enriched* manifestation, as a *distinct human* endeavor, crucial for fostering societal evolution. Also:

> [...] the process by means of which knowledge, skill, technique, understanding, ideas, emotional and spiritual attitudes, are transmitted from individual to individual and from generation to generation. It is also a major part of the process by which the latent potentialities of the individual are actualized and developed to their fullest extent. (Huxley, 1946, p. 30).

Huxley's (1946) educational viewpoint encompassed both adult education and self-education broadly, alongside the narrower concepts of formal schooling and training. The broader notion of education, in particular, became pivotal in shaping the concept of *fundamental education* that underpinned UNESCO's program.

According to Huxley (1946), education represented a domain of knowledge with its distinct methodologies—an evolving art gradually establishing itself on scientific foundations. However, despite its progression towards scientific grounding, Huxley believed that these bases had not been adequately explored, understood, or applied within education. In Huxley's (1946) humanist perspective, the disciplines shaping individuals should serve as vehicles for "cultivating a genuinely human consciousness, one that is receptive and responsive to diverse perspectives, through an awareness rooted in a historical critique of cultural conditions" (Abbagnano, 1995, p. 519).

In Huxley's view (1946), UNESCO's approach to education should incorporate not only general principles regarding human development but also additional principles lacking in existing educational systems, which encompassed ideas such as education being an ongoing and continuous process, extending beyond youth to encompass adults. He emphasized that education serves both a societal and individual function, enabling societies to comprehend their traditions and shape their destinies. Furthermore, education should be rooted in scientific principles, with research being vital for its evolution, a domain where UNESCO should play a role by encouraging and disseminating research outcomes. Aligned with these principles, UNESCO would take a significant role in the global reconstruction of education and, consequently, in human development.

Identifying key problems for UNESCO's educational program, Huxley (1946) prioritized "combating illiteracy" as its foremost challenge. He asserted that literacy was essential for advancing scientific and technical knowledge, enabling their effective

application in enhancing health, agriculture, industry, and fostering comprehensive intellectual and mental development.

Indeed, Huxley (1946) advocated for integrating literacy campaigns into the mainstream education system for school-aged individuals. Moreover, he suggested a distinct approach for individuals beyond school age who were illiterate, proposing that their education should not be tied to the formal educational system but rather to a broader scope of social education focused on areas such as health care, modern agricultural practices, and citizenship education. This viewpoint proposes a specialized education system tailored to address practical issues specifically for those who missed schooling at the appropriate age.

Within this specialized educational system designed for individuals beyond school age, literacy might have been considered less central or could potentially be excluded. Consequently, during that period, UNESCO consolidated its focus on literacy campaigns into a larger initiative known as *Fundamental Education*. Huxley (1946) argued that focusing solely on literacy would not suffice to lead a society toward democracy or ensure comprehensive societal development. He highlighted the stark example in which

> Nazi Germany demonstrated all too clearly the way in which one of the most literate and most thoroughly educated peoples of the world could be led into false ways and anti-democratic developments; in democratic countries, the manipulation of the press and the debasement of literature and the cinema for financial or political ends is all too possible. (HUXLEY, 1946, p. 31).

Nor would literacy alone suffice to attain global awareness and comprehension. Huxley's (1946) "humanist" and liberal concepts were not sanctioned. However, his viewpoint on education and the understanding that literacy campaigns alone could not bring about desired transformations formed the cornerstone for UNESCO's development of the Fundamental Education Program.

In line with these notions, UNESCO, as emphasized by Huxley (1946), ought to initially aid in devising methods to identify individual aptitudes and gauge intelligence. Subsequently, it could contribute to crafting higher education systems that accommodate varying levels of individual intelligence and abilities. Following this perspective, UNESCO should primarily invest in the Fundamental Education Program, which was ratified during the organization's General Conference held in Paris between November 19 and December 10, 1946.

The Concept of Fundamental Education

The concept of fundamental education and the scope of the Fundamental Education Program were pivotal topics in the discussions held by the Preparatory Committee, which deliberated on what UNESCO *should or would become*. These discussions were also central to the work of the organization's Education Section. Initially, the discussions were focused on aligning the program with the global goal of "eradicating illiteracy." As highlighted by Huxley (1946), literacy campaigns were integrated into this overarching program.

The *Report of a Special Committee to the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization*, prefaced by Huxley (1947), aimed to elucidate the proposed program. This report was the outcome of the Education Section's efforts within the Preparatory Commission, shaping it for presentation during the First Session of the UNESCO General Conference in November and December 1946. Huxley (1947) noted that despite attempts to present the report at the conference, printing issues led to the publication of only the first and last chapters in pamphlet form, along with a leaflet summarizing the entire content.

The report, as per Huxley's preface (1947), focused on a global movement where UNESCO could steer its efforts. It highlighted a substantial population lacking the means to engage in modern life, posing a threat to world peace and security. Consequently, UNESCO found compelling reasons to prioritize fundamental education as a key area of its activities and interests. Therefore, UNESCO found compelling grounds to prioritize fundamental education as a core area of its focus and interest.

The initial perspective outlined in the report's *Introduction* highlighted the need for actions beyond the confines of teaching basic reading and writing skills. At that time, the program's expansion beyond literacy stemmed partly from challenges in defining global illiteracy rates due to varying conceptualizations of literacy among different countries. For instance, in New York, an individual who could write their name was deemed literate, while elsewhere, a person should be capable of reading written sentences or letters to be granted the same status. Despite the challenges in precisely determining illiteracy rates, the report highlighted high rates of illiteracy in various countries during the 1940s, particularly in Latin American nations. For instance, British Guiana and Chile had rates of 50% illiteracy, trailed by Brazil (70%), Cuba (50%), Puerto Rico (55%), and Mexico (72%).

Faced with the obstacles to carrying out an adequate measurement of the number of illiterates in the world, in the discussions that took place in 1946 and in those that followed, the idea of a broad approach prevailed: that of *fundamental education*. Thus, the published report, with an updated version in 1949, maintained this term, as it included aspects that extended beyond literacy itself. This approach underlined the necessity for the Fundamental Education Program to address the genuine needs of global populations, aiming to improve life within communities worldwide. From this perspective, fundamental education held significant social value and was viewed as instrumental in the advancement and development of nations where illiteracy prevailed. However, its primary objective wasn't solely focused on literacy.

John Bowers (1948), the general executor of the program, addressed the use of the term "fundamental education" by UNESCO in an article published in El Correo. He emphasized that when the term was first introduced, some believed it solely targeted eradicating illiteracy. However, Bowers highlighted that within the program, acquiring literacy was merely a means to a broader end. Thus, according to Bowers (1948), the recently defined objective of fundamental education was: "to assist individuals in leading more fulfilling lives in harmony with their surroundings, nurturing the finest aspects of

their culture, and attaining the economic and social advancements necessary for their integration into the modern world" (Bowers, 1948, p. 4, our translation).

Highlighted in the examined documents, the program extended beyond literacy, as emphasized by Bowers (1948). Its primary aim was to aid the most underprivileged communities in addressing practical issues like economic hardships and healthcare challenges experienced in their daily lives, all in pursuit of a better quality of life. Bowers (1948) used the example of the Mexican Cultural Missions to illustrate the program's objectives. These missions, through the efforts of "fundamental educators," were transforming lives by imparting practical skills such as disease prevention, improved agricultural practices, weaving, baking, and more, without necessarily focusing on literacy instruction.

Regarding the Mexican Cultural Missions, as noted by Berrueta (1993), following the conclusion of the Armed Revolution in 1921, Mexico's first Secretary of Public Education, José Vasconcellos, initiated an anti-illiteracy campaign, established rural schools, and appointed the *first missionaries*. Berrueta (1993) further correlates the cultural missions in Mexico with the history of rural schools, a connection affirmed by Alfonso Rangel Guerra (2006). Rangel Guerra highlights that Rafael Ramírez, a prominent educator on a national level, began formulating ideas concerning rural education in the 1920s.

According to Alfonso Rangel Guerra (2006), the Cultural Missions were initiated by Professor Roberto Medellín, an employee of the Mexican Ministry of Public Education. In 1923, Medellín led the first mission alongside Professor Rafael Ramírez and five other teachers, focusing on various disciplines such as soap and perfumery, tanning, agriculture, choir and popular songs, physical education, and nursing. This mission participants were intent on educating people from poor and indigenous communities on health practices regarding hygiene, cultivation methods, and animal care for improved well-being.

After being suspended by President Cárdenas in 1938, as highlighted by Berrueta (1993), the Missions resumed in 1942, transitioning into an after-school and extension program. Thus, different missionary groups were formed with different purposes: rural cultural missions, special missions for workers, and teacher training missions. As outlined by the author, the Missions restructured their activities, emphasizing an educational approach geared towards "holistic community enhancement and the professional development of in-service teachers" (Berrueta, 1993, p. 117, free translation).

Between 1942 and 1947, as noted by Berrueta (1993), the Missions were conducted by workers lacking adequate preparation, primarily due to the low salaries they received and the challenging circumstances prevalent within the communities they served. Additionally, as per the author, the Missions' duration did not permit the consolidation of objectives. The lack of adequate budget and qualified personnel further undermined their effectiveness and hindered their actions. In 1944, the Missions' efforts were associated with an anti-illiteracy campaign.

Despite the challenges encountered in carrying out the Missions in Mexico, Bowers (1948) recognized them as a commendable practical model aligning with UNESCO's intentions, emphasizing that UNESCO's Fundamental Education Program aimed to

encompass both rural and industrialized regions. The primary focus in the initial phase was addressing the prevalent issues of disease and poverty, which were central challenges in rural areas. In industrialized regions, pilot projects were set to be developed, with the backing of the International Labor Office.

According to Huxley (1976), the Fundamental Education Program yielded favorable outcomes, introducing hygiene principles and enhancing agricultural practices and environmental methodologies. Nevertheless, subsequently, this terminology was discarded, leading to a shift where it became possible to

> [...] establecer contactos entre sí distribuyéndose las investigaciones en función de las necesidades de la región, al mismo tiempo que se mantenían en comunicación con la ciencia en el mundo gracias a la información *educación fundamental* y se elaboraron por separado proyectos de sanidad, conjuntamente con la Organización Mundial de la Salud, y de educación general, de enseñanza de las ciencias, de control de la población, de intercambio de personas y de conservación de la naturaliza. (Huxley, 1976, p. 5, emphasis in the original).

Huxley's text (1976) does not explicitly detail that the controversies surrounding the program persisted until its conclusion in 1958. One significant point of contention was the emphasis placed on literacy. While imparting hygiene practices and promoting environmental care were deemed crucial for societal and communal progress, many believed literacy was indispensable for industrial development, which called for a workforce equipped with basic reading and writing skills, prompting persistent requests for literacy education from member countries.

Functional Literacy

Indeed, as previously discussed, literacy was not the primary focus of the Fundamental Education Program, whose objectives were purportedly more expansive, distinct from mere literacy campaigns or efforts against illiteracy. However, controversies arose concerning this perspective because illiteracy posed a pervasive challenge for governments across numerous countries worldwide, particularly in underdeveloped nations.

According to the preamble of the Report entitled *Educación fundamental, educación de adultos, alfabetización y educación de la comunidad en región del Caribe*, written by Howes *et al*., (1955), the Antilles Conference of 1952 instructed the Caribbean Commission was tasked with conducting this study, which addressed, among other subjects related to Caribbean education, fundamental and adult education, literacy, and community education. Thus, this document expresses positions on both literacy and fundamental education. Regarding the latter, it points out that:

> [...] es la instrucción mínima y general que tiene por objeto ayudar a los niños y a los adultos privados de las ventajas que ofrece la instrucción oficial a comprender los problemas que se plantean en su medio ambiente inmediato, así como sus derechos y deberes en calidad de

> ciudadanos e individuos, y a participar de un modo más eficaz en el progreso social y económico de su comunidade. (Howes *et al*., 1955, p. 11).

This concept underscores an intended correlation between fundamental education and both social and economic development from the program's inception. As outlined in the Report, fundamental education was considered crucial as it offered the basic theoretical and practical knowledge necessary for individuals to enhance their living situation. Consequently, it served as a prerequisite to ensure the efficacy of endeavors such as sanitation practices, agricultural work, and other related activities.

According to Howes *et al*. (1955), the program employed active methods that centered on students' interests and addressed practical challenges encountered by communities. It was designed to cater to children deprived of a proper schooling system and adults lacking educational opportunities, specifically targeting communities with alarmingly high illiteracy rates.

In the 1950s, literacy was regarded as one of the various tools used to impart basic education to both communities and individuals. However, as previously mentioned, it was not the primary focus of the program. Concerning the necessity to fight illiteracy, the Report emphasizes:

> [...] no nos lleva muy lejos y los gritos de victoria, proclamando que gracias a la campaña realizada el número de analfabetos se puede contar por centenares en vez de millares, resultan ridículos. En tales casos los objetivos son casi siempre muy limitados. (Howes *et al*., 1955, p. 15).

The authors acknowledge the interconnectedness between illiteracy, disease, and poverty in underdeveloped areas, emphasizing that reducing illiteracy could significantly impact a country's productive capacity and contribute to poverty alleviation. They assert that learning to read and write "[...] enables individuals to adapt more readily to societal changes and lead more fulfilling lives, both individually and within their communities" (Howes *et al*., 1955, p. 15).

However, while recognizing the importance of literacy in both developed and underdeveloped nations, the Report challenges arguments that suggest literacy is indispensable for learning practical activities. It contends that at that time, audiovisual materials were emerging as effective tools for teaching practical skills, potentially substituting the need for extensive written instruction. Moreover, despite widespread adult literacy campaigns in various countries, the efforts failed to yield satisfactory outcomes. Consequently, literacy continued to be viewed solely as a means to an end. While crucial for elevating living standards, it was not perceived as capable of producing the immediate desired outcomes outlined by the UNESCO program on its own.

UNESCO had two primary motivations for investing in the Fundamental Education Program. Firstly, it aligned with Huxley's observations in 1946, emphasizing that nations boasting high literacy rates actively participated in global conflicts. Secondly, there was a recognition that traditional literacy, confined merely to decoding written language, lacked practical significance in its conceptualization. Consequently, a redefinition of literacy was

imperative for UNESCO to integrate literacy campaigns into its initiatives. It needed to be reshaped to align with the objectives of the Fundamental Education Program.

In his work *Teaching the World to Read*, initially published in 1947, Frank Charles Laubach[5] (2013) underscored illiteracy as a formidable barrier to both economic and social progress. Hence, eradicating global illiteracy becomes crucial for fostering fairer and more equitable economic conditions worldwide. In his view, a scenario where only a small segment of the world experiences relatively high economic prosperity, while the majority lives in poverty, would inevitably result in persistent turmoil and uprisings in the regions inhabited by these individuals. Empowering them with literacy skills would not only enhance their quality of life but also fortify the dominant global powers.

Based on his viewpoint, in the post-war era, no nation would be secure as long as there remained marginalized populations. That is why Laubach (2013) highlighted two potential courses of action for the United States: either pouring resources into global defense and policing or, as he terms it, embracing a *Christian-inspired approach*, fostering economic parity among all nations akin to the existing level in the United States. From his perspective, the latter course was the most suitable. By aiding others to reach similar economic standards, gratitude would likely emerge, fostering affection for the nation and amplifying its Christian actions, consequently setting an example for other nations and promoting a spirit of collaboration and mutual assistance. The author further highlights:

> People are happy when they are in the process of improvement. They are in sullen despair when their efforts to improve are frustrated. Despite our national debt, therefore, the United States must help the underprivileged countries of the world, as well as the underprivileged in our own country. And we must avoid appearing to be the world's big bully. (Laubach, 2013, p. 3).

Laubach (2013) also held the belief that the key to addressing world hunger lies in educating populations on how to cultivate their own food. However, merely developing instructional materials for this purpose would not suffice, given the widespread illiteracy prevalent in these communities. Merely distributing machinery would not be a solution either, as it necessitated skilled labor, an attribute lacking due to high illiteracy rates. Consequently, the only truly effective course of action, in his view, was to elevate global education levels—a process that would only commence with literacy campaigns.

Education programs' objectives should, therefore, encompass *combatting illiteracy*. However, mirroring such a literacy initiative in the American educational system was not feasible due to its high cost. Thus, discovering cost-effective, expedient methods became imperative to achieve the goal of eradicating illiteracy, particularly in impoverished nations. From this viewpoint, the approach advocated should not rely on sophisticated materials or extensive teaching qualifications.

The author suggests that, for economically challenged nations, designing education programs should prioritize affordability, simplicity, and rely on voluntary efforts. In a

5- Frank Charles Laubach was a religious missionary of sorts who developed a method of adult literacy known as the Laubach method. His method and missionary actions are often cited in UNESCO texts.

sense, Laubach (2013)[6] outlined paths that UNESCO could potentially follow to address the international community's call for investment in literacy programs while suggesting that literacy campaigns could be tailored to align with the interests of major powers, fostering a sense of gratitude that often led to compliance with these nations' interests.

In response to the demand from nations grappling with high illiteracy rates, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) strongly advocated for and endorsed a comprehensive study of literacy programs and teaching methodologies on December 2, 1949, to initiate projects aimed at addressing illiteracy. Hence, this organization urged UNESCO to explore strategies to "eradicate illiteracy." Responding to this call, UNESCO commissioned a study aimed at examining teaching methodologies to identify, analyze, and delineate approaches employed in instructing both children and adults in reading and writing. Additionally, the study sought to gather data on the efficacy of methods used in adult literacy instruction.

The research conducted by William Gray[7] led to the publication of UNESCO's *Preliminary Survey on Methods of Teaching Reading and Writing: Part I Survey of Theories and Practices* in 1953. The report's Introduction details the process of organizing the study, which began with a preliminary survey of materials stored at the UNESCO Clearing House documentation center and the Bureau International d'Éducation (BIE) library. Research also involved identifying the names and authors of materials utilized in teaching adults to read and write. To collect data on these materials, member countries were sent letters requesting information along with titles of works and copies of the publications used. Additionally, over thirty experts in the field, knowledgeable about teaching reading and writing with these materials, were contacted for input.

Numerous responses were received from this survey detailed in the *Introduction* of the report, significantly aiding UNESCO in its intended analyses. The definitive version of the report was published in 1956, with the title *The Teaching of Reading and Writing*. This edition was specifically dedicated to adult literacy work within the framework of the Fundamental Education Program. The focus primarily lay on this definitive version, as it elucidated the pathways followed by UNESCO, especially concerning the adapted concept of literacy aligned with the program's objectives.

According to Gray (1956), the overarching goals outlined in the latest UNESCO reports regarding the Fundamental Education Program—such as assisting individuals to live longer and more fulfilling lives, adapt to evolving environments, cultivate their cultural understanding, and leverage economic and social advancements—alongside specific aims, like aiding people in comprehending and resolving daily challenges, formed the basis for contemplating reading programs aimed at children and adults who lacked formal education opportunities.

In the early stages of UNESCO's Fundamental Education Program, there was initial skepticism among its members regarding the significance of acquiring reading and writing skills in enhancing people's quality of life. However, Gray (1956) argued that literate individuals would be better equipped to access information and solve everyday problems

6- It is crucial to note that at that time, Laubach was consistently referenced in UNESCO literature due to his missionary endeavors promoting literacy.
7- Williams S. Gray, author of this study, was a professor of Education at the University of Chicago.

more efficiently compared to those lacking such knowledge. He emphasized the crucial inquiry at the time: determining the optimal literacy level necessary to fulfill the goals of fundamental education. Gray (1956) identified various expected literacy levels, ranging from basic abilities such as reading a simple sentence or writing one's name to a higher level encompassing basic reading habits.

Initially, strategies to combat illiteracy, as per Gray (1956), focused on establishing minimum literacy standards—rudimentary reading and writing skills—but these fell short of achieving the broader objectives outlined in the Fundamental Education Program. The training regimen comprised approximately twenty-five classes utilizing materials from one or more instructional booklets. Instruction predominantly focused on word recognition and the fundamental aspects of writing. Consequently, proficiency in reading and writing was gauged by the capacity to comprehend a simple passage and produce either a name or a basic message.

Gray (1956) observed that this literacy approach persisted in numerous regions globally, meeting the aspirations of adults eager to grasp rudimentary reading skills for practical purposes and exercise their citizenship rights. Despite its limitations, brief educational programs held an allure for adults, given that most were disinclined to enroll in extensive courses or, after doing so, struggled to complete them.

Moreover, according to Gray's findings (1956), many public officials contended that, owing to insufficient teachers and financial resources, adult education ought to be minimized, that is, they advocated for focusing solely on decoding written words within a passage, deeming this adequate for motivated individuals capable of independently grasping written meanings. Nevertheless, according to Gray (1953), this policy permitted individuals who met the minimal standards upon course completion to utilize reading and writing skills for basic purposes only. Often, these acquired skills were forgotten over time due to lack of practice.

Simultaneously with these endeavors aimed at attaining basic reading and writing abilities, the author highlighted efforts to cultivate higher literacy standards, primarily revolving around the concept of *functional literacy*, which, in his view, had been evolving over the past three decades. In implementing teaching methods aligned with this concept, two guiding principles were evident: customizing the nature and duration of training to suit the specific needs of the served groups and tailoring instruction to reasons that could persuade adults about the significance of learning to read and write.

As per Gray (1956), literacy requisites spanned from addressing simple tasks and daily routines to skills empowering individuals to assume pivotal roles in society's reconstruction. Community expectations helped define the nature and duration of literacy programs. In his perspective, these programs ought not only to equip individuals to meet social, economic, and political demands but also to enrich personal experiences and pave ways for enjoyment and inspiration through reading.

Despite this viewpoint, Gray (1956) advocated for functional literacy, as he recognized that adhering solely to minimum standards fell short of the Fundamental Education Program's objectives. He asserted that instructional materials must directly align with the motivations driving groups to learn reading and writing. Additionally, the

duration of training and literacy levels should be adapted to suit the unique needs and cultural contexts of the groups assisted. The impetus behind learning to read and write primarily stemmed from the pressing and pragmatic needs of a community seeking to enhance its livelihood, underscoring the necessity for a functional approach to teaching. A functionally literate individual has acquired reading and writing knowledge and skills that enable them to effectively engage in all activities of their culture or group in which literacy is necessary (Gray, 1956).

Thus, based on Gray's study (1956), it can be inferred that embracing the concept of functional literacy played a significant role in reinstating literacy within UNESCO's global education policies as it did not lose focus on its broader goal. Later, UNESCO exclusively adopted the concept of functional literacy, a policy that endures till the present times. This approach was then integrated into initiatives championed, funded, and endorsed by the organization.

Final Considerations

In summary, our exploration reveals that UNESCO's Fundamental Education Program did not prioritize the global population's literacy, particularly in impoverished nations. Factors contributing to this decision included instances where highly literate nations took part in World War II, resulting in widespread devastation across several countries. Amidst discussions on enhancing literacy, Gray (1956) emphasized that functional literacy represented the most suitable approach to empower individuals, communities, and societies to address practical challenges and fulfill their roles in reconstructing society. UNESCO embraced this concept, as it aligned with both its objectives and those of the Fundamental Education Program.

Drawing from Giroux's (1986) insights, it can be inferred that literacy was characterized by mechanical and functional definitions. It was, on one side, "reduced to mastering basic skills" and, on the other, became

> [...] completely intertwined with the needs and logic of capital. Its significance was determined and gauged by the necessity for reading and writing skills essential for the expanding labor sectors focused on 'mass production of information, communication, and finance. (Giroux, 1986, p. 270).

Within UNESCO's initiatives, literacy was no longer perceived "as a form of cultural policy" (Macedo, 2000, p. 84). Instead, it adopted a concept, per Giroux (1986), rooted in an instrumental ideology—constructed within a framework aimed at adapting individuals and societies to the economic order. The notion of functional literacy, as explored in this discussion, shifted the focus from promoting social, economic, and political changes toward adapting groups and societies to global transformations orchestrated by dominant world powers. It allowed for literacy approaches tailored to the unique needs of groups and peoples.

Though this concept evolved throughout UNESCO's history, it consistently retained an instrumental nature, underscoring the ongoing necessity for educators to

advocate for literacy among children, adolescents, youth, adults, and the elderly, which rejects the mechanistic and utilitarian aspects previously associated with literacy. In contrast to this perspective, it becomes crucial to pursue educational approaches within literacy and schooling that foster the development of "values such as solidarity, social responsibility, creativity, and discipline in service to the common good—a vigilant and critical spirit" (Macedo, 2000, p. 96) rather than subservience. Throughout its history, Brazil, for instance, has veered away from this emancipatory undertaking, leading to the current advancement of a moralizing and conservative agenda.

In the *Introduction* to the work co-authored by Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1990), *Alfabetização: leitura do mundo, leitura da palavra*, Giroux (1990, p. 2) observes the scarcity of identifiable theoretical stances or significant social movements that champion and expand the tradition of critical literacy akin to radical theorists like Gramsci, Mikhail Bakhtin, and others—Paulo Freire being a notable exception. Giroux (1990) emphasizes that the concept of *critical literacy* traces back to the mid-20th century, notably present in the ideas of Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci politicized literacy, becoming "an ideological meaning suggesting its role being less about teaching people to read and write and more about the production and legitimization of oppressive social relations" (Giroux, 1990, p. 1).

According to Giroux, Gramsci advocated for a literacy concept rooted in an ethical and political framework, one that dignifies and expands "the potential of human life and freedom" (Giroux, 1990, p. 1). Paulo Freire's contribution lies in constructing a critical view of literacy, centered on the belief that individuals are agents, active participants in processes driving genuine change toward a just and democratic society. This viewpoint did not find resonance within UNESCO's literacy model, as, unlike critical literacy, functional literacy aims to conform individuals to societal norms and requirements.

It is essential to acknowledge that the global project of *functional literacy*, catering to varied needs and capacities across nations and individuals, perpetuated inequalities. This ongoing model failed to address the root causes of disparities. We live in an era marked by various forms of inequalities, as Geraldi (2010, p. 114) highlights, framing "inequalities as a refusal to share"—whether it is knowledge, material possessions, or power. These inequalities, in our view, are exacerbated by literacy policies that neglect the fundamental role of reading and producing texts in dismantling the *exclusionary structures* inherent in capitalism. Engaging in these activities cultivates individuals who are more discerning, critical, participatory, assertive of their rights, responsible, and consequently, dedicated to fulfilling duties that advance the common good.

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