

# Adult Illiteracy

**Ann-Marie Trammell**

*University of Phoenix Online, USA*

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of illiteracy is a serious one, especially for adults. Worldwide, 880 million adults have been labeled as illiterate, and in the United States it is estimated that almost 90 million adults are functionally illiterate—that is to say that they do not have the minimal skills needed to function in society. Children of school age have ready access to programs and remediation to help them acquire literacy skills, and with the advent of federal policies such as No Child Left Behind, more students are being caught before they fall through the cracks and become illiterate for life. Adults, however, do not have this type of access to remediation programs meant to target illiteracy, and in most countries (especially underdeveloped countries), there are no such programs even in the planning stages. These illiterate adults are often forced to hide their inabilities and are cheated out of better jobs, proper health care and benefits, and helping their own children with schooling. Because of these issues and the stigma that illiteracy carries, most adults do not ever admit that they have poor to nonexistent literacy skills. This stigma forms a cycle of poor literacy skills, which becomes hard if not impossible to break. Only through effective literacy programs, which use strategies that work for adult learners, can this problem be solved.

## A DEFINITION OF ADULT ILLITERACY

Providing a definition of adult illiteracy is difficult. There are many definitions that are suitable, but for the purposes of this paper we will use the definition provided in 2002 by the National Center for Education Statistics as to what literacy is. It states that literacy is, “Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” So, it goes to reason that illiteracy would be an inability to use “printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and poten-

tial.” This definition was chosen as a focus due to the fact that it goes beyond the skills of literacy including comprehending and decoding. It also includes the wide range of information-processing skills that adults use daily whether in work, school, community, or personal lives (Burggraf, 2002). It is inclusive in all areas in regard to daily life and the skills needed to function in society. Literacy cannot only be thought of as an ability to read and write. It must be viewed, especially in relation to adults, as an ability to read print, write print, and use what is read or written to function as a contributing member of society. Without this, an adult is viewed as an illiterate person. The issue of illiteracy must also be viewed separately from the issue of alliteracy. Alliteracy is when a person is perfectly capable of reading but chooses not to. He or she will only read when necessary or when it is required for work or a needed activity. Alliterates have become more pervasive in society and are often thought of when discussing illiteracy. However, alliterates have a major advantage: They can read and write, and use the information gleaned to apply to society and their personal lives. Illiteracy is the inability to use the literacy skills necessary to function.

## STATISTICAL INFORMATION

In a study commissioned by Congress in 2002, the National Center for Educational Statistics found that approximately 40 million functionally illiterate adults cannot perform the reading and writing tasks required to function in society or in their jobs. Another 50 million adults have only marginal literacy skills. Functionally illiterate adults refers to the category of adults who might have some literacy skills, but seemingly cannot read or write. A functional illiterate can read such things as menus or environmental print (signs, wrappers of food, labels, etc.) but cannot read a sentence or make meaning out of text. Again, these types of illiteracy cause problems in both society and in the work environment. As the number of illiterate adults continues

to grow, technological and scientific advances make the availability of jobs for people with low reading and writing skills less and less. There are no longer jobs available that do not require some form of literacy skills. This need for jobs which are not available can hurt the United States' economy, its workforce, and its standard of living. As more and more jobs require a high level of literacy, even to receive supplies and such, more people are unable to function in the job market. With today's economy causing so many layoffs, this could cause the cycle of poverty to continue or to start in many families. Gaining literacy skills in and of itself does not guarantee a better way of life or higher standard of living. It means, rather, that there is the possibility of gaining a better and higher paying job.

Illiteracy can also cause a lack of competition in the workplace, leaving many service industry jobs unfilled due to a lack of qualified applicants. This is harmful to society as a whole as many jobs are necessary for society to function. When they are unfilled, it causes gaps in services provided and in community relations. Certain services are taken for granted until they are not there. Jobs that are commonly viewed as service jobs such as repairmen, garbage collectors, construction workers, and maintenance jobs now require a high level of literacy skills to function. There are stricter guidelines that must be followed and certifications that must be received. It is no longer good enough that someone can work with his or her hands, or is good with people. Literacy surrounds us on a daily basis and is pervasive in our way of life. Those who are illiterate are faced with daily obstacles to providing support for themselves and their families.

Worldwide, the problem of adult illiteracy is larger. As stated before, 880 million adults have been labeled illiterate. It could be assumed that most of these illiterate adults live in underdeveloped nations, but that assumption would be wrong. Many countries such as Brazil, France, Germany, and Australia are tackling illiteracy among adults in an attempt to help eradicate the problem.

## **ATTEMPTS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE**

The focus on adult illiteracy has only recently come to the focus of the media and the public. Although the definition and statistics are current, adult illiteracy is not a new problem. In 1990 the National Governors'

Association identified adult illiteracy as one of the six key areas for improvement over the decade. This was to be one of the areas that the nation needed improving on with the goal that each state could focus on this issue to help alleviate its problems. This identification was followed in 1991 by the passage of the National Literacy Act by Congress. The goal of the National Literacy Act was to enhance the skills of adults and to ensure that all adults in the United States acquire the basic skills that they must have to effectively do a job. Working from the definition of illiteracy, the goal of the act was to ensure that all adults could be literate. Another goal of the Literacy Act was to strengthen adult literacy programs provided to these illiterate adults (Bowen, 1998/1999). These programs were ones that received federal and state funds and were aimed at specifically increasing illiterate adults' ability to read, write, and function in the workplace.

This act was followed in 1996 by President Clinton's launch of the America Reads Challenge. The purpose of the America Reads Challenge was to improve the reading abilities of children, however one of the goals of the challenge was to support and increase literacy throughout the family (Bowen, 1998/1999). It has been found that those who grow up in an illiterate family often remain illiterate themselves. This is the cycle of illiteracy. Even if adults in a family value literacy, it becomes cyclical due to the fact that illiterate adults cannot help their children, nor do they set a reading example for their child. Therefore, by strengthening the literacy of an entire family, it not only strengthens adult literacy, but a child's or children's literacy as well.

Despite these wide-sweeping governmental policies, there has been little to no gain in the area of helping to end adult illiteracy. This lack of progress can be attributed to many reasons. One of these is that there is no standard method or program used to address the issue of illiteracy among adults. There are a group of different methods and objectives depending upon the funding, the objective, the program, or the adults themselves. Another is that most programs focusing on adult illiteracy believe that adults need to gain literacy skills for the sole purpose of economic gain. This narrow focus sends the message to adults that there is no reason to become literate other than to make more money or to have a higher standard of living. This is not worth the effort to some adults, especially those who have had negative experiences with literacy in the past, or those who feel that their standard of living is high enough. If

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