

Ending Illiteracy Through Education: Why Formal Education Still Matters

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Abstract. *In the information-driven world of today, the ability to read and write is not just a skill, it is a lifeline. Yet, millions of people, especially women, still lack this basic human right. Despite the rise of digital tools and informal learning, formal education remains the most reliable path to ending illiteracy. This paper explores what illiteracy truly means and why formal education; structured, inclusive, and teacher-led continues to matter. From ancient civilizations to modern classrooms, formal education has served as society's most effective system for teaching literacy. It provides a structured environment, ensures equal access, and nurtures not just reading and writing, but also critical thinking, empathy, and community belonging. While digital learning can enhance education, it cannot replace the human connection and accountability that formal schooling offers. To end illiteracy, we must reform and not replace formal education by investing in teacher training, modern curricula, and equitable access. Literacy opens doors to opportunity, dignity, and development. The key to that door is still held by our schools.*

Key words: *Illiteracy, Formal Education.*

Introduction

In a world increasingly driven by information, literacy is not just a skill; it is a human right. The ability to read and write is fundamental to personal empowerment, societal participation, and economic progress. Yet, more than 750 million adults globally, two-thirds of whom are women, still lack basic literacy skills (UNESCO, 2023). Despite advances in technology and alternative learning methods, formal education remains the most effective, scalable, and equitable tool to combat illiteracy.

To understand why formal education is still central to ending illiteracy, we must first define what illiteracy and formal education mean, examine the roots and evolution of formal schooling, and explore its enduring role in a rapidly changing world.

Defining Illiteracy

Illiteracy refers to the inability to read and write at a level adequate for communication and comprehension in everyday contexts. According to UNESCO (2023), a person is considered illiterate if they cannot, with understanding, both read and write a short, simple statement about their everyday life. Illiteracy is more than just a lack of academic achievement; it is a profound social disadvantage that limits individuals' opportunities for employment, civic participation, and personal development.

Illiteracy can be functional where individuals have basic reading and writing skills but cannot apply them effectively or absolute, where no literacy skills exist at all. The causes of illiteracy range from poverty and conflict to cultural barriers and inadequate educational infrastructure.

Defining Formal Education

Formal education is the structured, institutionalized system of teaching and learning that typically takes place in schools, colleges, and universities. It follows a prescribed curriculum, is delivered by trained teachers, and often leads to certification or accreditation. Unlike informal or non-formal education, formal education is standardized and regulated, offering a consistent framework for literacy development and academic progression (Gutek, 2013).

Formal education involves early childhood education, primary and secondary schooling, and higher education. Each stage builds upon the previous one to provide comprehensive cognitive, emotional, and social development. Importantly, formal education systems are designed to be inclusive and publicly accountable, making them critical for addressing systemic illiteracy.

The Historical Roots of Formal Education

The concept of formal education dates back to ancient civilizations. In Mesopotamia, schools were established to train scribes to read and write cuneiform script. In Egypt, literacy was reserved for priests and administrators. The education of ancient China was deeply rooted in Confucian principles, emphasizing morality and governance. Meanwhile, ancient Greece introduced the idea of education for citizenship, emphasizing logic, rhetoric, and physical training (Bowles & Gintis, 2011).

The Roman Empire institutionalized education as a tool of statecraft, and the Islamic Golden Age saw the emergence of madrasahs, where students studied theology, law, medicine, and mathematics. In medieval Europe, cathedral and monastic schools laid the foundation for modern universities, such as the University of Bologna and Oxford.

With the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, formal education became a tool for mass instruction. Governments established compulsory schooling laws to prepare citizens for industrial work, civic responsibility, and nation-building (Gutek, 2013).

Why Formal Education Still Matters in the 21st Century

1. Structured Learning for Foundational Literacy

Formal education delivers literacy in a progressive, sequenced manner. From phonemic awareness and vocabulary building in early grades to comprehension and critical analysis in later stages, the structured nature of formal schooling allows for cumulative learning. According to the World Bank (2022), structured early-grade interventions improve literacy outcomes significantly more than unstructured programs.

For learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, structured education provides the only consistent environment for acquiring literacy. Trained teachers, age-appropriate materials, and continuous assessment make formal education more effective at closing literacy gaps.

2. Equity and Universal Access

Formal education is legally mandated in most countries, making it one of the few systems designed to ensure equity. While informal and online learning are often restricted to those with resources, public schools are accessible regardless of socioeconomic status. UNESCO (2023) notes that school enrollment remains the most reliable predictor of literacy acquisition.

Formal education serves as a platform for social mobility. In communities where illiteracy is intergenerational, schools provide the opportunity to break that cycle through systematic instruction and exposure to literate practices.

3. Human Interaction and Mentorship

Beyond literacy, formal education fosters socio-emotional development. Students interact with peers, engage in group work, and receive mentorship from teachers. These human connections enhance learning and build essential life skills.

OECD (2023) highlights that digital tools cannot substitute the relational dimension of education. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students in low-tech environments suffered the most learning loss,

especially in literacy. Teachers play an irreplaceable role in diagnosing learning needs, motivating students, and personalizing instruction.

The Challenges of Informal and Digital Alternatives

Informal and digital learning avenues offer flexibility but fall short when addressing systemic illiteracy:

Lack of Structure: Without a guided curriculum, learners may miss essential literacy milestones.

Access Inequality: The digital divide excludes millions from online learning. The ITU (2022) reports that over 2.7 billion people still lack internet access.

Insufficient Oversight: Informal learning lacks monitoring mechanisms to evaluate literacy progress, making it difficult to identify and support struggling learners.

While these platforms can supplement learning, they cannot replace the role of formal schooling in delivering comprehensive literacy education.

Formal Education and Literacy for Sustainable Development

Literacy is integral to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education (UN, 2023). Literacy empowers individuals to:

- Participate in democratic processes
- Access health information
- Secure employment
- Support the education of their children

Countries like Finland and South Korea have achieved near-universal literacy through investments in teacher quality, curriculum reform, and equitable school funding (World Bank, 2022). Their success stories underscore the centrality of formal education in national development.

Bridging the Gap: Reform, Not Replacement

While formal education is indispensable, it must evolve to meet contemporary needs. Key reforms include:

1. **Teacher Development:** Ongoing training enhances literacy instruction (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).
2. **Curriculum Innovation:** Teaching materials must reflect learners' languages, cultures, and realities.
3. **Blended Learning:** Integrating digital tools with classroom instruction can improve access and engagement.
4. **Community Partnerships:** Collaborating with families and NGOs strengthens literacy ecosystems.

These reforms should enhance, not replace, the foundational role of formal education.

Reclaiming the Moral Imperative of Formal Education

Formal education does more than teach reading. It nurtures informed, empathetic, and capable citizens. By investing in schools, we invest in the future. A literate child becomes a literate adult who can navigate the complexities of the modern world and contribute to societal well-being.

Kofi Annan once said, "Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope." That bridge is paved through formal education systematically, inclusively, and enduringly.

Conclusion

Formal education remains the most powerful weapon against illiteracy. It provides structure, equity, and accountability, making it the most effective tool for mass literacy. While digital and informal alternatives have their place, they cannot match the depth, reach, and reliability of formal schooling. To truly end illiteracy, we must strengthen our schools, support our teachers, and renew our commitment to public education.

Ending illiteracy is not just about decoding text, it is about unlocking human potential. For that, formal education is more relevant than ever.

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