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Functional Literacy from a Cross-Cultural Perspective: A Comparative Study of Canada and Japan

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of
Education

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Abstract

Functional Literacy from a Cross-Cultural Perspective: A Comparative Study of Canada and Japan

Makoto Nakamura

According to UNESCO, industrialized countries are now being affected by "functional illiteracy." Canada and Japan have almost opposite standpoints with regard to literacy issues. In Canada, on the one hand, the 1987 Southam Report warns that 24% of adults are functionally illiterate, and 100,000 illiterates are annually added to the population by a flawed education system. On the other hand, illiteracy is considered non-existent in Japan based on the 99.9% attendance rate in Japan's compulsory education. This thesis discusses some of the most crucial issues involved in defining and measuring functional literacy, and the state of current functional literacy research. It also explores whether or not Canada is having a functional literacy "crisis," as some recent studies suggest, and whether or not Japan's literacy rate is truly 100 per cent as its government and Ministry of Education claim.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Literacy Today

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) strongly claims that literacy is a basic human right and a fundamental tool for productive lives and the fulfilment of citizenship, yet world illiteracy persists (Graff, 1979; UNESCO, 1972, 1987a, 1988a, 1988c). In recent years, the promotion of literacy has been recognized as a national concern in many parts of the world, including highly industrialized countries as well as developing countries (Dauzat & Dauzat, 1977; Hillerich, 1976; Powell, 1977; Scribner, 1984; UNESCO, 1972, 1988a; Wagner, 1987). The importance of literacy education is becoming increasingly stressed as the international community as a whole becomes more aware of illiteracy problems (UNESCO, 1988c). However, what exactly do we mean by "literacy"? How much do we know about it? The quest for definitions, boundaries and the measurement of literacy seems endless. Despite all the enthusiasm about advancing literacy, few government bureaus, social organizations, and even literacy programme planners have undertaken to claim what they mean by literacy or illiteracy. Those few who have attempted to explain precisely what literacy is create definitions that conflict and rarely support one another. Such an attempt appears even more difficult than "finding a needle in a haystack, for at least one knows what a needle is and how it is different from the hay" (Dauzat & Dauzat, 1977, p. 37).

International Literacy Year

The 1985 General Conference of UNESCO at its 23rd session urged that the eradication of illiteracy by the year 2000 should be a major goal of the entire international community as well as of UNESCO. The conference launched an appeal to proclaim an international year, which would contribute to the advancement of literacy, and to greater understanding of the various aspects of illiteracy (UNESCO, 1988a, 1988b). In response to this appeal, the 1987 United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 42/104, proclaiming 1990 as International Literacy Year, and appointing UNESCO to play a key role in its campaign. In December 1989, 1990 International Literacy Year was officially launched at the United Nations Headquarters in New York (UNESCO, 1988a, 1988b, 1989a).

One of the most fundamental goals of the 1990 International Literacy Year was to generate favourable bases for launching a decade-long Plan of Action, encouraging all the UNESCO member states to contribute collectively to the eradication of illiteracy by the year 2000 (UNESCO, 1988a, 1989b). The objectives of the Plan of Action are summarized as follows (see UNESCO, 1989b, p. 6):

(i) to call the world public's attention to the magnitude of illiteracy and to the seriousness this problem poses to the harmonious development of society;

(ii) to alert the international community to the causes of illiteracy in order to guarantee a conducive environment for literacy work;

(iii) to support the regional literacy programmes, including the extension and strengthening of the network of people fighting against functional illiteracy in the industrialized world; and

(iv) to promote more effective co-operation among the UNESCO member states, including a more active exchange of information on national experiences and reinforcement of training for literacy educators.

UNESCO seems to predict that an agency (e.g., UNESCO) can bring about literacy for all, suggesting a singular view of literacy without considering the possibility of the existence of many "literacies." What underlies UNESCO's view of literacy/illiteracy?

Literacy in Industrialized Countries

According to the estimates made by UNESCO's Office of Statistics, as of 1985, more than 98 per cent of the total number of illiterates in the world live in developing countries (UNESCO, 1988a, 1988c). All the industrialized countries in the world have established compulsory education systems over the last 130 years or so, providing their citizens with at least nines years of schooling. These nations boast 95 per cent and over enrolment rates in compulsory education (UNESCO, 1990). Increase in enrolments in education systems is often interpreted as a solid indicator of an increase of future literacy rates. The reality is, however, while education systems are being quantitatively developed in most parts of the world, the quality of education in many countries, including highly developed nations, still remains questionable (Harman, 1970).

A relatively new phenomenon UNESCO claims to have found is that, in recent years, industrialized countries are beginning to realize that they are affected by "functional illiteracy" (see Chapter II for a comprehensive analysis). UNESCO (1988c) claims that certain industrialized countries have "discovered," and "officially admitted" to having a significant number of functional illiterates who may know the alphabet or figures but whose literacy is so "rudimentary" that they cannot effectively perform everyday tasks involving written information or find employment in modern industrialized society (p. 4). Again, UNESCO seems to suggest that a singular definition of functional literacy could be found, but is UNESCO's claim accurate? What crucial issues are involved in the definition and measurement of functional literacy?

Literacy Issues in Canada and Japan

Interestingly, Canada and Japan, both G7 nations, maintain almost exactly opposite standpoints with regard to literacy issues. Canada appears to be obsessed with the notion that the country is having a literacy crisis, while Japan seems to be completely indifferent to anything to do with literacy. How have these different views been formed, how are they reinforced, and what purposes do they serve in each setting?

Canada. In Canada, the controversial Southam Literacy Survey (1987) warns that an estimated five million or 24 per cent of Canadian citizens 18 and older nation-wide are either "basically" or "functionally" illiterate in English or French (see also Calamai, 1987). This survey claims further that, illiteracy is responsible for "a huge economic and social cost and business, government and society are paying for it" (Calamai, 1987, p. 31). Even excluding immigrants who may or may not be literate in their mother tongues, 22 per cent of Canadian-born adults are said to be affected by functional illiteracy, and 100,000 illiterates are allegedly added to the Canadian population every year by a "flawed education system and humanitarian immigration policies," and "deaths, emigration and literacy training only reduce the ranks by an estimated 70,000 annually" (Calamai, 1987, p. 8). Are these data and conclusions on literacy and illiteracy to be trusted? How valid a ground are they based on?

Japan. In Japan, on the other hand, during the 1990 UNESCO International Literacy Year, UNESCO Japan, the media and Buraku-related private organizations carried out an extensive campaign for the advancement of literacy issues (the Burakumin are Japan's largest minority group. See Chapter IV for the Burakumin). Their efforts, however, went largely unnoticed by the majority of the Japanese (Kochi-ken Kyoiku Iinkai Jimukyoku Koko Kyoikuka, 1992; Kokusai Shikijinen Suishin Chuo Jikko Iinkai, 1991). The Japanese government and the Ministry of Education claim that the attendance rate in Japan's compulsory education (equivalent to the ninth grade in North

America) has been 99.98 per cent and above for the last 18 years (as of 1997) (Monbusho, 1997). Based on these figures, the government perceives illiteracy as the "problem of the Third World," and "non-existent" in Japan (Kokusai Shikijinen Suishin Chuo Jikko Iinkai, 1991, p. 1). Is Japan, as its government and Education Ministry claim, truly a 100 per cent literate society?

Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to attempt to answer the following questions:

(1) What are some of the most crucial issues involved in defining and measuring functional literacy?

(2) Is Canada having a functional literacy "crisis" as some recent studies (e.g., the Southam Literacy Survey) suggest? What is the state of current functional literacy research?

(3) Is Japan's literacy rate truly 100 per cent as its government and Ministry of Education claim? If not, is there any distinct group that is affected by illiteracy? What issues are subsumed under the 100 per cent claim?

(4) Why is literacy/illiteracy a widely discussed issue in Canada and a non-issue in Japan? How have these different views been formed and reinforced?

I suggest that the answers to these questions will be found to be complex and only capable of partial answers.

CHAPTER II

Functional Literacy: The Quest for a Definition

> 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. 19)

> The functional illiterate are usually able to read, but at a level which is inadequate to find a job in a modern economy or to participate effectively in an increasingly complex society. (UNESCO, 1988a, p. 5)

> Note that functional literacy is a relative measure rather than an absolute one. The same skill level may result in one being considered functionally literate in one context and functionally illiterate in another. (International Literacy Year Secretariat of UNESCO, 1990, p. 8)

> Looking at definitions of literacy may be an impossible task: the idea that complex concepts are susceptible to dictionary-like definitions is probably a myth. (Barton, 1994, p. 19)

Problems of Definitions

A Historical Overview

What does the term "literacy" mean? Literacy requirements have changed significantly over the years since the invention of writing in human history. New standards have changed estimates of a population's literacy. For instance, if one had to interpret a complex text with obscure literary allusions and to obtain inferential rather than directly stated information to be considered literate, the world might have to declare a crisis in literacy. On the other hand, if the literacy requirement today were simply to write one's own name, illiteracy would not be a global concern (Heathington, 1987; Resnick & Resnick, 1977). According to Resnick and Resnick (1977), however, signing one's own name has not always been an easy task required of everyone.

In the early stage of human society, spoken language was a sufficient tool of communication, as long as people communicated only with their families and neighbours. Spoken language was even able to preserve the history, science, and culture of a people, as the oral tradition was passed on from generation to generation (Goodman, 1985). Until well into the nineteenth century, the ability to produce the letters of one's signature was not shared by the majority of the population, even in the most developed European nations. It was not until the advent of the twentieth century that literacy for the purpose of obtaining information has been applied to the entire population through the public school system. As human society has become more and more sophisticated, it has constantly produced new knowledge, the amount of which is more than the oral tradition can handle. Thus, written language, which can store an infinite amount of information over time and space, becomes an alternative in modern society. Consequently, literate society requires its people to be more educated (Goodman, 1985; Kirsch & Guthrie, 1977-1978). In providing formal education for an increasing number of people, written language becomes a primary method of obtaining and utilizing information. As a result, literacy skills assume growing importance in developed societies as well as in the measurement of human competencies (Kirsch & Guthrie, 1977-1978).

While everyone would recognize the advantages of possessing literacy skills or the efficacy of writing as a tool of communication, identifying and measuring exactly what literacy skills are required in order to efficiently deal with real-life materials involving written information in modern society is not an easy task (Kirsch & Guthrie, 1977-1978). The lack of agreement on what counts as literacy has resulted in the lack of agreement as to what should be measured, because the manner in which literacy is assessed depends upon one's definition of literacy (Fagan, 1989).

With the enormous number of specialists, books and articles on literacy issues, one would probably expect to find a consensus on the definition of the term "literacy." However, attempts of researchers and educators to search for the one best definition and measurement of literacy have not yet succeeded but rather ended up in ambiguity and confusion. Scribner (1984) argues that conceptual contradictions and disagreements are "intrinsic to such an essentialist approach" of attempting to find a single definition and measurement of literacy (p. 7). This approach perceives literacy in terms of individual abilities, but in fact, individuals become literate only with participation in social activities with written information. Individuals in societies without writing systems, therefore, do not acquire literacy skills. Moreover, literacy practices vary depending upon time and space, and what qualifies as being literate varies accordingly. Thus, the quest for a definition of literacy requires the assessment of what counts as literacy in some given era of a given society.

On the one hand, most experts would agree that the term literacy refers to features of reading and writing. On the other hand, they still have not reached, if they ever will, a collective agreement on such issues as what specific abilities or knowledge qualify a person to be literate, and what "levels" can and should be defined for measurement purposes (Wagner, 1987, p. 5). Thus, UNESCO initially chose the rather general notion of "functional literacy" (Gray, 1956) (see also UNESCO, 1988a; International Literacy Year Secretariat of UNESCO, 1990).

Because hundreds of orthographies exist for thousands of languages in which uncountable context-specific forms are employed, attempting to decide on a universally applicable definition may seem "ill-advised" (Wagner, 1987, p. 6). The concept of functional literacy, however, seems to present a fair amount of common-sense appeal due to its implied applicability to a given cultural context. Wagner argues, nevertheless, that this terminology is unsatisfactorily defined for measurement and evaluation purposes.

In recent years, an increasing number of literacy advocates have started to call for the world-wide eradication of illiteracy. Wagner (1987) warns, however, that literacy is a socio-cultural phenomenon which, like culture itself, cannot and perhaps should not be radically changed over a short period of time. Any interference, he suggests, should be supplemented by serious consideration of the cultural contexts in which literacy/illiteracy is rooted.

The Concept of Functional Literacy

In today's literature, according to Langer (1988), literacy interchangeably refers to an "action," "skill," or "state," each originating from a different tradition in research and instruction (p. 42). The first type of reference to literacy in the educational literature often denotes performing actions that require the use of written information. Thus, such actions as finding the correct dosage from a bottle of cough syrup, completing a tax refund form, writing a business letter, or comprehending a literary work have been taken to indicate literacy. Because these actions involve widely different types of literacy abilities, readers must identify the specific acts in the name of literacy in order to understand particular information. The lack of identification of specific acts necessary to function in a given society results in a wide range of estimates of "functional illiteracy" among the population. According to Langer, this is one of the reasons that estimates of literacy rates appearing in the professional literature as well as in the public press fluctuate widely. Discussions that regard literacy as an action characteristically focus on activities taking place in schools, homes, or communities.

Literacy can also be considered a set of skills that allow the aforementioned activities to be successfully accomplished. Standard decoding, encoding, and word identification are prime examples of the skills to which the term literacy has often been referred. It has been argued that higher level reasoning abilities are required in modern technological society, and that these abilities should be part of the practical repertoire of authentic literacy. Discussions that regard literacy as a skill can be distinguished by their focus on the mental operations that occur during the completion of an activity (Langer, 1988).

Sometimes literacy is considered a state of being that distinguishes educated individuals (e.g., to be "highly literate"). The knowledge an individual has accumulated through education is used as an indicator of academic achievement. Langer (1988) argues that issues stemming from this view of literacy are often distinct from those arising from views of literacy as an action or skill, for the focus is likely to be on "the Great Books," on a major curriculum, or on the nature of a "common culture" (p. 43). Discussions regarding literacy as a state can be characterized by the social value place on the volume or type of content that is under consideration.

Research in various fields has indicated that the context of literacy use plays a key role in designating how literacy learning takes place, and that society becomes literate when its motivation to facilitate literacy education collaborates with individuals' willingness to utilize literacy for meaningful purposes. Research in education, however, has often considered literacy merely a set of skills to be acquired rather than social activities in which to engage, separating literacy skills from the social uses, values and constraints that affect literacy learning (Langer, 1988).

In their attempt to examine the concept of functional literacy, Kirsch and Guthrie (1977-1978) present another way of distinguishing among the various meanings attached to the term "functional literacy." For many years, the term "literacy" has referred to the acquisition of intellectual competencies in reading and writing and has been defined in terms of various educational measures. While currently little universal agreement on a definition of functional literacy is available, experts emphasize effective performance on reading tasks which enable individuals to participate in real-world experiences. Kirsch and Guthrie argue that a fundamental problem lies in the range of literacy activities included in the definitions of functional literacy, and that distinctions should be made among the terms "literacy," "functional literacy," and "functional competencies" (p. 489).

According to Kirsch and Guthrie (1977-1978), literacy in written language provides an effective mode of enabling an individual to transmit and acquire knowledge and of enjoying cultural-aesthetic satisfactions. In this sense, there is no upper boundary on the genre of materials which individuals should read. "Functional" literacy, on the other hand, involves skills that a population needs in order to perform some specific real-world tasks. Kirsch and Guthrie, therefore, define functional literacy as comprehending written materials to achieve an end which has a "survival value" (p. 490). Kirsch and Guthrie further distinguish functional literacy from functional competency, which is a more inclusive concept. They argue that literacy should not refer to skills beyond those with written language, and that the term "literacy" should refer to reading and "cognitive competency" to general skills in listening, reading, writing, and calculating.

Limitations to the Functional Approach

According to a number of researchers, functional literacy has been broadly defined as the level of proficiency required for effective operation of written language in a range of situations and customary social activities (see Gray, 1956, 1969; Kirsch & Guthrie, 1977-1978; Powell, 1977; Resnick & Resnick, 1977; Scribner, 1984; Wagner, 1987). Despite its common-sense appeal, Scriber (1984) argues, the concept of functional literacy is not as tangible as it seems. For example, how do we decide if a given functional literacy skill is "necessary" or "optional" (p. 9)? Do all societies and cultures in this heterogeneous world face uniform literacy needs? The use of the term "functional" is based on the "norms" of a given cultural context, but it fails precisely because of the difficulty in defining adequate norms in a given society (p. 5). For example, it is vague as to what literacy level should be required in different types of occupations in highly industrialized nations like Canada and Japan. Do a police officer and a brain surgeon share common literacy needs? Similarly, if we were to adopt the degree of fluency required in small and isolated communities as the definition and measurement of functional literacy, educational objectives would be excessively limited. On the other hand, literacy skills of university graduates would be too much of a demand for the national average functional literacy requirement.

The time-limited nature of the definition of functional literacy is another point to consider (Langer, 1988; Resnick & Resnick, 1977; Scribner, 1984). During the First World War, the U.S. Bureau of Census adopted a forth-grade education as a criterion for literacy. In 1947, the Bureau raised the level to fifth grade, and by 1952, six years of schooling was considered necessary for functional literacy activities (Harman, 1970; Scribner, 1984). There will always be the need to transcend current literacy requirements, and the functional approach to literacy fails to take this into consideration.

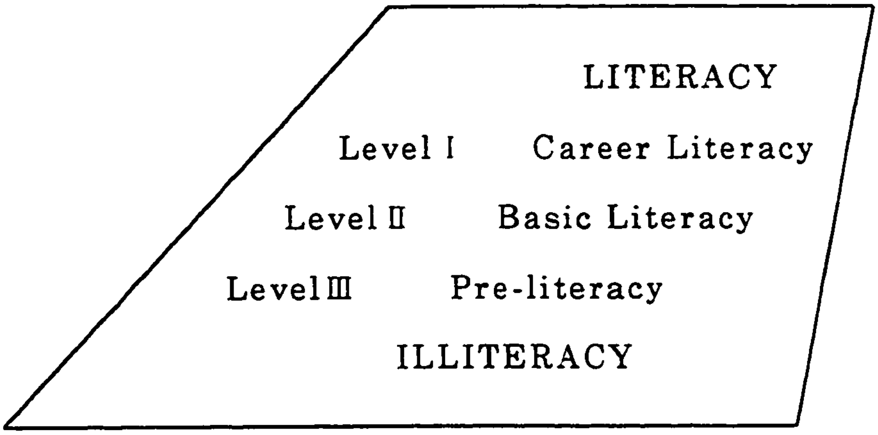
The fundamental limitation to the functional approach is that this approach treats literacy as a set of universal skills which are applicable anywhere (Barton, 1994). In a specific context in a specific occupation, it may be possible to list literacy requirements. Applications of literacy are, however, closely linked to situations, and the number of various situations where literacy is required is infinite. The concept of functional literacy has been widely accepted as a major advancement over traditional concepts because it takes into account the purposes and situations of people's real-life activities with written information. Yet, the aforementioned problems complicate its application to educational research.

Defining Levels of Literacy

What might be a satisfactory definition of literacy? Different literacy tasks require different types and levels of literacy skills. Yet, the level of literacy as a national goal must refer to a level at which one can effectively handle everyday situations involving written information (Dauzat & Dauzat, 1977). Powell (1977) attempts to present precise definitions of the terms literacy and "basic skills," and to indicate how they are related to each other (p. 488). Although dictionary definitions generally state that literacy is a state in which a person is able to read and write, few people now consider this criterion as satisfactory.

A literate individual is expected to be able to perform certain language and computational tasks with some level of skill required by society without assistance from others. Powell (1977) presents three subsets of literacy levels which he designates as the "pre-literacy" level, the "basic literacy" level, and the "career literacy" level (p. 489) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Levels of literacy.


LITERACY
Level I
Career Literacy
Level II
Basic Literacy
Level III
Pre-literacy
ILLITERACY

(Powell, 1977, p. 489)

Pre-literacy level. According to Powell (1977), pre-literacy is the first subset towards minimal literacy. At this level, individuals begin to acquire essential literacy skills upon which further learning depends. The pre-literacy level involves basic skills which allow individuals to effectively perform the tasks required in elementary school education. No assurance is given at this level that individuals have permanently acquired these skills, and they may or may not be able to utilize them accurately and automatically in facilitating further learning.

Basic literacy level. The unstable skills acquired at the pre-literacy level become firmly established at the basic literacy level. This is a level where a person's literacy skills become intact and independent of external assistance, though this performance level will not allow the person to deal with an extensive number of real-life activities involving written information. Literacy skills acquired at this level, according to Powell (1977), are simple skills that can be sustained over time without wearing away. He argues that these basic skills are probably measurable, and the crucial requirements to their acquisition may be defined. Powell equates such a procedure to "determining prime factors in mathematics" (p. 491).

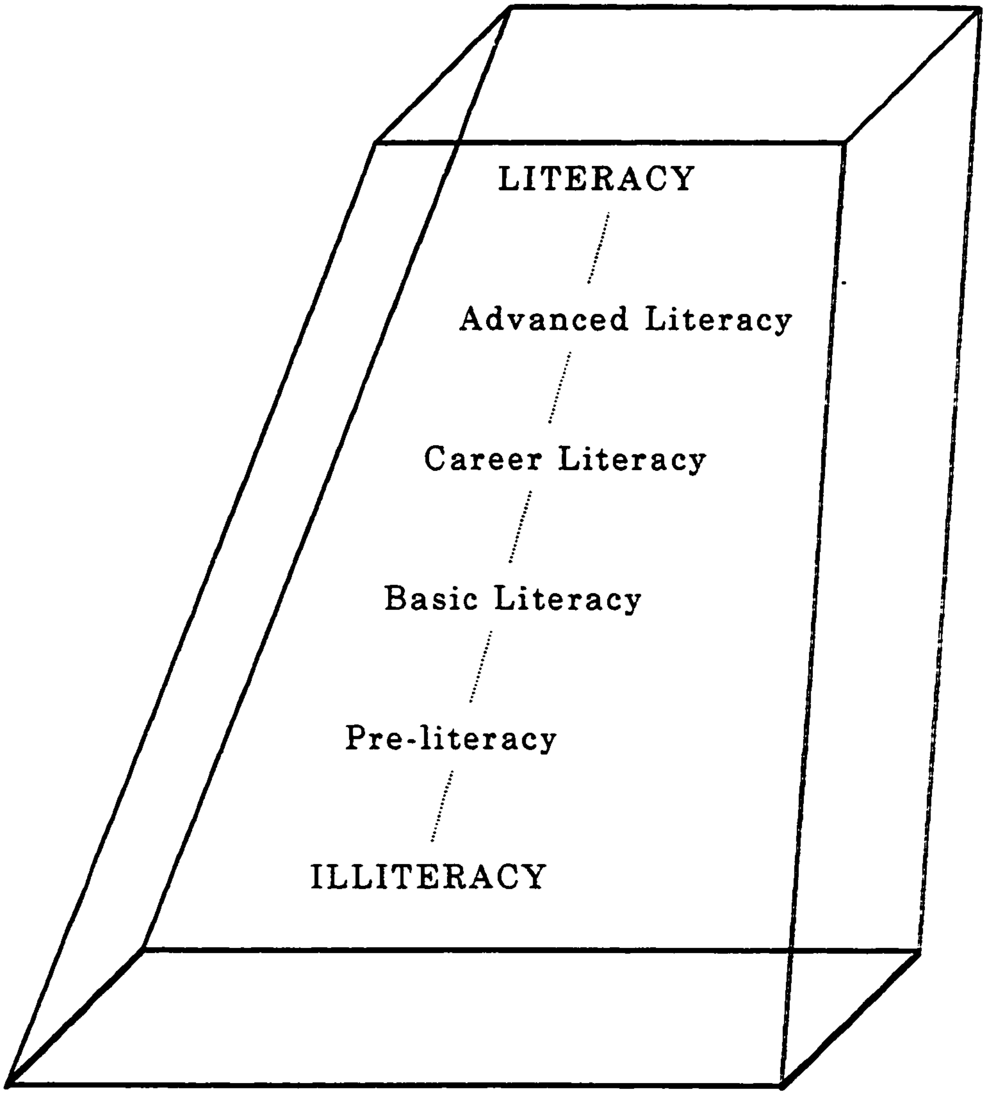
Career literacy level. Literacy skills attained at the basic literacy level will not permit individuals the level of performance which meets occupational needs in sophisticated societies. The career literacy level, therefore, is concerned with multidimensional skills. Stability and the ability to generalize at the basic literacy level do not apply to this level, because obviously occupational requirements vary from job to job, and the different performance levels among occupational activities cannot be generalized (Powell, 1977).

Unlike the basic literacy level which is possibly measurable, generalizable, and unidimensional, the career literacy level can be measured only for each occupation, non-generalizable across occupational roles, and multidimensional. Powell (1977) argues that a definition of functional literacy most appropriately fits in this category.

Advanced literacy level. In addition to Powell's definitions of levels of literacy, I propose to include "advanced literacy" or academic literacy beyond career literacy (see Figure 2). I define advanced literacy as the level of literacy involving skills that are capable of handling activities beyond everyday or occupational situations. At this level, individuals are expected to possess literacy skills that enable them to learn how to read and write critically, and initiate, extend and defend their own original and substantial arguments. Writing academic papers typically requires this level of literacy skills.

Literacy as a three-dimensional continuum. What Powell (1977) fails to articulate is the continuous and three-dimensional nature of literacy. Wagner (1987) describes literacy as a continuum of diverse abilities to deal with written information, which goes from a hypothetical zero to some upper limit. Hillerich (1976) also argues that any definition must consider literacy a continuum, reflecting all stages of development. No such magical point exists where an individual abruptly transforms from one level to another, or from "illiterate" to "literate." Thus, I revise Powell's chart as follows:

Figure 2. Three-dimensional continuum of literacy.


LITERACY
Advanced Literacy
Career Literacy
Basic Literacy
Pre-literacy
ILLITERACY

Metaphors for Illiteracy

> It's not as life-threatening as AIDS, nor as terrible as mass murder, nor as current as acid rain,.... But in the long run it could be a far more damaging threat to Canadian society. (Calamai, 1987, p. 8)

> There are times when dramatic, emotion-laden language is used to convey a sense of urgency and there are other times when it is used to advance an agenda. In discussions of adult literacy, all stakeholders have a moral responsibility to avoid allowing "war against illiteracy" to turn into an undeclared war on illiterates. In "conquering the epidemic of illiteracy" we must not view the learner as diseased. (Ilsley & Stahl, 1993, p. 25)

Implications of Views on Illiteracy

According to Barton (1994), different views on the causes of illiteracy carry different implications for how to respond to the problem, and how to characterize the people in question. Some metaphors consider illiteracy a disease, a handicap or a psychological matter, calling for treatment, rehabilitation or therapy, while other metaphors perceive it as a social or political problem, which requires educational training or empowerment. Likewise, different views blame different things for illiteracy problems, namely, the individual, the family, the school or the society. Barton presents a comprehensive chart of different views on illiteracy (p. 13), and Table 1 is its revised version.

Table 1

Views on Illiteracy.

Concept	*Response*	*Means*	*Goal*
Sickness	Treatment	Clinical intervention	Cure
Handicap	Rehabilitation	Compensatory aids	Alleviation
Ignorance	Training	Instruction	Mastery
Incapacity	Therapy	Counselling	Adjustment Assimilation Autonomy
Oppression	Empowerment	Political/ Organizational legislation	Rights
Deprivation	Welfare	Reallocation of material resources	Benefits
Deviance	Control	Isolation Containment Physical coercion	Correction Conformity
Enemy	Combat	Defeat	Conquer

UNESCO's Approach to Illiteracy

Since its establishment after the Second World War, UNESCO has given high priority to the advancement of literacy, claiming literacy to be a fundamental first step to social and individual development (Barton, 1994). What ideas are behind UNESCO's views on literacy/illiteracy? According to UNESCO (1988a), illiteracy affects "workers' productivity, hampers the organization of health, sanitation and other public services, complicates the creation of political structures based on popular consent and ... hinders the progress of the individual and of society" (p. 4). Hence, UNESCO and many of its member nations have pledged to "combat," "eradicate" or "wipe out" the "scourge" of illiteracy by the year 2000 (UNESCO, 1987a, 1987b, 1989a, 1989b). UNESCO's argument seems to involve two major metaphors, namely the medical metaphor and the military metaphor (see Ilsley & Stahl, 1993; Scribner, 1984; UNESCO, 1987a, 1987b).

The medical metaphor. In UNESCO's literature, illiteracy is often compared with disease as if illiteracy were one of them (see UNESCO, 1972, 1987a, 1987b, 1988a, 1989a, 1989b). According to Ilsley & Stahl (1993), the medical metaphor typically treats illiteracy as either a disease or a handicap. For example, in response to the social "disease" of illiteracy, the medical metaphor directs non-literate adults to a learning "clinic," where "symptoms" are "diagnosed" by a "clinician," followed by the "prescription" of an individualized plan of instruction (p. 22). In other cases, a non-literate person may be declared a dyslexic or learning "disabled" individual (p. 22).

First, the concept of curing illiteracy as if it were a disease does generate public consciousness, societal sympathy, and charitable participation in solving the problem. Nevertheless, Ilsley and Stahl (1993) argue that literacy programmes are more attractive to people when they feel encouraged or privileged to attend these programmes rather than when they are ashamed or even forced into programmes for curing the "disease named illiteracy" (p. 23). The idea that an "epidemic" exists in our society implies that illiterates are "contagious," to be avoided or feared (p. 23).

Second, treating illiteracy as a handicap seems to be based on a deficit model that attributes illiteracy to developmental deficits, proposing rehabilitation programmes for "handicapped" individuals to correct these deficits (see Ogbu, 1981). Thus, the medical metaphor locates literacy problems within an individual instead of a broader context. Moreover, if illiteracy is viewed as a developmental handicap, it implies that there is rarely any real cure at all. The deficit model itself is under question in other fields of education, so it should be questioned in the study of literacy as well (Ilsley & Stahl, 1993; Ogbu, 1981).

The military metaphor. Again in UNESCO's literature, such expressions as "combating" and having "victory over" illiteracy, and "battling" for a literate world often appear (e.g., International Literacy Year Secretariat of UNESCO, 1990; UNESCO, 1972, 1987a, 1987b, 1988a, 1989a, 1989b). The military metaphor suggests that the "enemy" is a "threat" to our society, and that we win the "battle" against illiteracy by attacking the "target" populations (Ilsley & Stahl, 1993, p. 23).

Who is the enemy in this battle, though? The military metaphor is, like the medical metaphor, based on a deficit model. The theory behind this metaphor is that defeating the enemy, that is, erasing illiteracy from society, will realize higher employment figures, increased productivity, and even lower crime rates. It implies, Ilsley & Stahl (1993) argue, that non-literate individuals are a threat to society, unemployable, and therefore "targets" for literacy instruction (p. 23). Yet, is it logical enough for society to hate the opposite of what it desires? Promoting hate of illiteracy will not necessarily prompt a literate society.

Myths behind UNESCO's Literacy Programmes

UNESCO has always considered literacy a measurable variable, which is linked to other variables of development, namely, economic advancement and social modernization (Barton, 1994). UNESCO's literacy programmes, therefore, seem to have been based on the idea that resources are pumped into literacy programmes and these programmes prompt development. The assumptions underlying this idea appear to consist of three major myths about literacy. First, UNESCO treats literacy as if it were unidimensional, and something that literate people commonly possess and illiterate people lack. Quite the contrary, however, literacy is multidimensional, as it differs from culture to culture, occupation to occupation, and society to society. Second, UNESCO seems to consider literacy intrinsically a technology, which is not affected by social settings; it is neutral. The reality is, however, that the general public's reading of literacy's social functions tends to be politically safe (i.e., uncritical) rather than critical, and this viewpoint serves the interests of certain groups. Thus, literacy is not neutral. Third, UNESCO firmly believes that literacy is a primary element in economic development in society, that is an independent variable. However, numerous failures of literacy campaigns in underdeveloped countries suggest that unless deeply rooted and relevant in the local environment, literacy cannot even sustain itself, much less prompt development. Development causes literacy, not the other way around (Lankshear & Lawler, 1987).

Some Conclusions on Definitions of Functional Literacy

Since literacy obviously has a language component, Dauzat and Dauzat (1977) argue that literate people must possess the proficiency level to use not only reading and writing skills but also all aspects of language as a tool of communication. Literacy involves the ability to use language as a means of coping with change and learning, and of becoming independent in the face of future technological developments. Measurement systems of literacy may be eternally in the developmental phase and never be all-encompassing, as they are formed by newly occurring types of literacy required by changing social demands.

In literacy studies, the focus (e.g., computer literacy, numeracy, or job-related literacy skills), assessment techniques, and outcomes differ significantly depending upon how literacy has been conceptualized. Langer (1988) argues that researchers need to address the interrelationships among the uses of the term rather than debating about what approaches and results are most useful and appropriate. Researchers should also realize the possibility that different approaches may offer complementary views on literacy.

Finally, the achievement of functional literacy is a continuous lifelong process, and scores on any literacy test merely indicate an individual's functioning level at a specific point of time for a specific set of tasks (Kirsch & Guthrie, 1977-

1978). This individual's classification may well change over time through the acquisition of further skills and change in the literacy requirements of his/her society.

Functional literacy is continuously distributed, with different levels of functioning. Therefore, I strongly argue that labelling somebody as "functionally illiterate" at just one point of his/her life is far too simplistic a classification, carrying social stigmas which are extremely difficult to erase. I would like to urge educational researchers, literacy advocates, and the media alike not to recklessly stigmatize individuals as such.

CHAPTER III

The State of Current Functional Literacy Research and the Literacy "Crisis" in Canada

> Conceptions of functional literacy are unsatisfactory, and cannot be salvaged. We ought to stop using the phrase "functional literacy." (Heap, 1990, p. 50)

> Literacy ... must be defined in terms of the circumstances (economic, social, geographic, etc.) of the people involved and their needs, whether immediate or long term. A single, simple definition of literacy will not suffice. Also, there is no place for sensationalism in attempting to address an issue that varies so considerably in its significance for different groups and individuals within the Canadian population. (Fagan, 1988, p. 231)

> Definitions and surveys of functional literacy are unsatisfactory. They do not encompass the metacognitive and practical reasoning practices required for rational, successful functioning in daily life. Even the most recent and sophisticated forms of literacy surveys do not measure people's ability to function in society with printed information. (Heap, 1990, p. 37)

Literacy in Canada

The results of some recent literacy studies allege that Canada is becoming affected by "functional illiteracy." While Canadian citizens are said to have become more educated than ever, the federal government's Skill Development Leave Task Force (1983), for example, claims that "21.9 per cent of the population lacks enough education 'to function in our word-oriented society'" (p. 25). Likewise, the controversial survey *Literacy in Canada: A research report* (1987) published by the Southam Newspaper Group and its companion document *Broken words: Why five million Canadians are illiterate* (1987) by journalist Peter Calamai warn that an estimated five million or 24 per cent of adult Canadians are functionally illiterate. Furthermore, these documents claim the rate of functional illiteracy in some parts of Canada to be 60 per cent and over, and these figures are on the increase, resulting in a two billion-dollar drag on the country's economy. Consequently, functional illiteracy has come to be blamed for poverty, unemployment, and even for crime and health problems in Canadian society (Olson, 1990).

The fact is, however, we have not found any hard evidence that functional illiteracy is the cause of any social evil whatsoever, and the validity and reliability of these self-claimed "functional literacy studies" have not yet been proven. In this chapter, I will scrutinize *Literacy in Canada* (1987), which is the first nation-wide functional literacy survey of its kind in Canada and is still (as of 1998) widely quoted by politicians, educators, literacy advocates and the media. I will also examine various aspects of current functional literacy studies in an attempt to ascertain if Canada is, as these studies suggest, actually having a functional literacy "crisis."

The State of Current Functional Literacy Surveys

Developing Functional Literacy Tests

When test developers construct a test, they inevitably include their socio-cultural value systems in the construction of their instruments (Ayrer, 1977). Depending upon their value systems, they may create drastically different tests with potentially very different results and implications, especially when the concept must be applied to a group as vast and heterogeneous as the entire Canadian adult population. A functional literacy test is a prime example, because no universally accepted or agreed-upon definitions or measurement criteria exist. Moreover, because there are radically different types of literacy competencies in different societies, it seems little use to even attempt to create a universally applicable and culturally unbiased literacy test (see Olson, 1986).

Conducting Functional Literacy Pilot Studies

After creating test items, according to Ayrer (1977), test developers typically conduct a pilot study on a group of sample subjects similar in kind to those who will take the final version of the test. The developers analyze the results of the pilot study, make changes and corrections where necessary, and develop a final version of the test. The idea of conducting a pilot study is to try out possible items of a group typical of those who will take the final version of the test in order to check the validity and reliability of the testing instruments. Good test items typically possess strong discrimination power, thus the most desirable functional literacy test items would be those which best distinguish between functional literacy and illiteracy. Therefore, the sample subjects in the pilot study would have to include individuals from both of those groups.

The fundamental problem is that test developers would not be able to conduct a pilot study of functional literacy without a firm definition of functional literacy. In other words, in order to pretest the test items of a functional literacy survey, test developers need groups of so-called functionally literate and illiterate adults.

Test Validity

Test validity refers to whether the test measures what it claims to measure (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). This is one of the most crucial issues for any test, because if the test does not measure what it is supposed to measure, the results derived from the test are completely uninterpretable and therefore meaningless.

Construct validity. It is of course very common in the field of educational research to develop a test which classifies an individual as possessing or not possessing a certain ability or skill (e.g., university entrance examinations, employment tests, and bar exams). In employment testing, according to Ayrer (1977), test developers typically develop a test by first conducting a pilot study with successful and unsuccessful employees in order to test the construct validity of their test scores. Put simply, construct validity is "the extent to which a particular test can be shown to assess the construct that it purports to measure" (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 249). Test items that maximally separate between the two groups will be used in the final version of the test, because these items are assumed to best distinguish the scores of potentially successful from unsuccessful applicants.

In the case of functional literacy testing, however, we have no way of finding a group of functional literates and illiterates to pretest the construct validity of a functional literacy test, precisely because we are unable to arrive at an operationally solid enough, unbiased, and universally applicable definition of the term.

Content validity. In addition to the construct validity of a functional literacy test described above, content validity must also be scrutinized. Again put simply, content validity refers to "the degree to which the scores yielded by a test adequately represent the content, or conceptual domain, that these scores purport to measure" (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 249). In other words, test developers must define the domain of functional literacy and create test items that are a sample from it. The biggest unsolved problem here is how to decide how many items an individual must answer correctly before he or she is considered functionally literate. As has been argued throughout this thesis, no concrete criterion exists for making such a decision.

Test Reliability

The reliability of a test typically refers to how much measurement error exists in the test scores. Whenever a test is conducted, in which some characteristic is described in the form of a score, the yielded score inevitably contains some measurement error. Naturally, reliable test scores contain a small amount of measurement error, while unreliable scores have a large amount of measurement error (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

Determining a Cut-Off Point

In the development of a functional literacy test, the final step is to determine a cut-off score above which individuals are classified as functionally literate and below which they are considered functionally illiterate (Ayrer, 1977). Again, no concrete and accepted criterion exists for making such a decision; there simply is no universally acceptable and agreed upon scientific basis for it.

Fundamental Problems

Heap (1990) argues that even the most recent functional literacy surveys do not accurately assess people's real abilities to function in day-to-day life with written language. Obviously, functional competencies of individuals involving written information will greatly differ depending upon many factors. The attempt to devise literacy task simulations for measurement and evaluation purposes typically results in misinterpretations of people's true literacy skills. The fundamental problem is that functioning in everyday situations requires performing effectively in open systems of action, which can only be examined partially by closed tests. According to Heap, the methodology that forms literacy surveys stems from the rationalistic analytic tradition. Rationalist analyses idealize everyday phenomena and the conditions of their occurrence in a closed system in order to discover their logically possible relations. The system is closed when the characterization of a problem and its proposed solution depend solely on the content of the elements and conditions inside the system. In an open system, on the other hand, phenomena that are not represented in the system can be relevant to characterizing and solving a problem at hand. In overlooking the problems of closed systems, literacy tests developers will always include the limitations of defining and measuring functional literacy in their tests. Without solving all of the aforementioned problems, no simulation can properly determine people's true ability to function with written information in our society. As noted earlier, Heap even suggests abolishing the term "functional literacy," as it is too arbitrary to be of any use.

The Southam Literacy Survey Revisited

The Southam Newspaper Group (1987) claims to have conducted the first nation-wide comprehensive analysis of the functional literacy skills of Canadian adults and also to have succeeded in establishing a criterion assessment of functional literacy for Canadian society. The survey was based on face-to-face interviews with 2,398 adult participants aged 18 and over in 148 Canadian communities. 418 sampling centres were established throughout Canada, from which interviewers were dispatched.

Background

The purpose of the Southam Literacy Survey was to explore specifically the "functional" literacy abilities of Canadian young adults. The Southam Survey was based on a selection of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) literacy tasks as well as the NAEP methodology and definition of functional literacy (Heap, 1990). In 1985, the NAEP conducted a study on literacy skills of American young adults aged 21 to 25. NAEP categorized the literacy performance of American adults into three scales, namely, prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy. The NAEP definition of literacy was to use "printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986, p. 3). The Southam Survey borrowed 50 of the 105 test items from the NAEP Young Adult Literacy Survey as well as 9 items from the 1983-84 NAEP reading proficiency scale (Southam Newspaper Group, 1987).

The Southam Literacy Jury consisted of 25 members, including Canadian authors, a book publisher, business and labour representatives, literacy advocates, and adult literacy students. The Southam Literacy Jury Panel agreed that *all* literate Canadian citizens should be able to answer the following ten key items correctly (Calamai, 1987, p. 13; see also Southam Newspaper Group, 1987, pp. 19-20):

(1) Read and understand the correct dosage from a bottle of cough syrup;

(2) From six traffic signs, choose one that warns of a traffic light ahead;

(3) Calculate the change from three dollars when ordering a soup and sandwich;

(4) Sign a name in the right place on a social insurance card;

(5) Circle the expiry date on a driver's license;

(6) (7) (8) (9) Answer four questions about a meeting, including the date, time, and people involved;

(10) Circle the long distance charges on a telephone bill.

The 25-member Southam Jury Panel decided that those who had three or more of the ten key items incorrect are functionally illiterate, and that those who had two questions incorrect are marginal but still literate. Applying the results of this survey to the 1986 census data, Southam News speculated that five million or 24 per cent of Canadian adult citizens cannot read, write or deal with numbers effectively to meet the literacy demands of industrialized and highly sophisticated Canadian society (Calamai, 1987; Southam Newspaper Group, 1987).

The research findings are summarized as follows (see Calamai, 1987, p. 16):

- The illiteracy rate is lower in the west (14 % for British Columbia) than in the east (44% for Newfoundland);
- The illiteracy rate is higher among francophones (29%) than anglophones (23%);
- Almost half the functional illiterates are 55 years of age or older;
- One-third of the illiterate are high school graduates;
- Those who are from jobless, working class, and

poorly-educated families have higher illiteracy rates;

- More men (53.5%) than women (46.5%) are among the illiterate;

The Southam Methodology

Sampling. Participants in this study were Canadian citizens aged 18 and over in the ten provinces, and south of the 60th parallel. Members of the armed forces, prison inmates, and native Canadians on reserves were not included. An extra sample of young adults aged 21 to 25 was chosen in each province in order to increase the sample size of this particular age group (Southam Newspaper Group, 1987).

The interview. The interview took 80 minutes average to conduct, including the following elements in their actual sequence of presentation:

- respondent selection;
- refusal questionnaire, where refusal was encountered;
- background and activities questionnaire;
- section 1 of literacy assessment, which

determined eligibility to proceed to section 2; and

- section 2 of literacy assessment.

(Southam Newspaper Group, 1987 ,p. 11)

Refusal of the interview. Southam News (1987) was concerned about the possibility that less literate Canadian adult citizens would also be less willing to take part in the study. To avoid possible refusal of the interview, the interviewers explained to potential participants that the purpose of this survey was “to collect information about the experiences, activities, and skills of Canadians” (p. 12). Moreover, respondents were given two one-dollar lottery tickets as a small incentive to insure participation (see also Calamai, 1987). When the respondent refused the interview, the interviewer was to ask only a few questions in order to obtain at least enough information on the respondent’s socio-economic background. This information was used to compare those refusing with those participating.

The Assessment of Functional Literacy

The Southam Literacy Jury came up with 24 key questions on which at least 80 per cent of the jury members agreed and these questions consisted "the key items scale" (Southam Newspaper Group, 1987, p. 20).

Sections 1 and 2 of the literacy assessment took 45 minutes of the 80-minute interview. Section 1 or the "core" consisted of 7 relatively simple items, and Section 2 was arranged into versions 1 and 2, containing 31 and 32 items respectively (Southam Newspaper Group, 1987, p. 13). Half the participants undertook each version. If respondents spent more than 5 minutes on a given item, interviewers were to ask them if they wanted to go on to the next item. If they skipped the question and went on to the next one. Their response was then recorded as "not attempted," and later coded as incorrect (Southam Newspaper Group, 1987, p. 14).

The Jury set the criterion measure of functional literacy at 80 per cent of the key items correct. Based on this arbitrary criterion, they concluded that 24 per cent of adult Canadians are functionally illiterate. Applying these figures to the 1986 census data, they estimated that "4,502,000 adult Canadians are illiterate" (Southam Newspaper Group, 1987, p. 20).

Criticisms of the Southam Survey

> When the test was then given to 1,500 people, even 8% of the university graduates failed to get 8 or more items correct. Instead of recognizing that the

> measure of functional literacy was invalid, the authors claim that university graduates too are illiterate! This, of course, is simply bizarre. (Olson, 1990, p. 17)

> ...there is no single measure or specific point on a scale that separates the "literate" from the "illiterate." (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986, p. 1)

To date, the Southam documents are frequently quoted by the media, politicians, and literacy advocates as if the research findings were credible or the "truth." I would strongly argue, however, that without careful and thorough examination, the credibility of these reports must never be assumed. In fact, quite a number of researchers have dismissed the Southam documents as unreliable, misleading, and meaningless (e.g., Fagan, 1988; Heap, 1990; Mathews, 1989; Nakamura, 1998, July; Olson, 1990).

First and foremost, there can be no such thing as the "national standard of functional literacy" for Canada, because this would force us to assume that all people, in all cultures, in all occupations, in all communities, and in all parts of Canada, face the same literacy requirements (Fagan, 1988, p. 226). Obviously, this is not the case. As discussed in length in Chapter II of this thesis, estimating the number of illiterates in a population requires a solid definition of literacy. Is literacy merely the ability to read newspapers or to write academic papers? The numbers will significantly vary depending upon the definitions of functional literacy/illiteracy (Ilsley & Stahl, 1993).

Indeed, Heap (1990) dismisses the Southam Survey's credibility by articulating that the purposes and materials presented in the survey were closed systems, and that the actual tasks in daily life were taken up and encountered as open systems. The test tasks, therefore, did not adequately simulate everyday situations. A functional literacy test is supposed to measure 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. 19). Heap argues, however, that literacy tests (closed systems) do not properly correspond to daily activities (open systems). In other words, closed systems cannot accurately measure literacy skills, and the Southam Literacy Survey is one such system.

Olson (1990) also doubts the credibility of the Southam Literacy Survey, because the test items had some serious pitfalls and shortcomings. The ten items participants were asked to do included things that some Canadians often do, while others seldom do. He dismisses the report's validity, claiming that, however carefully constructed, no ten items could fairly indicate whether someone is functionally literate. Moreover, performance on the kind of document-completion questions in the report does not necessarily correlate with the real ability to understand and respond correctly to actual documents, because the nature and use of the documents may not be interpreted at first sight without some previous knowledge about them. Olson, thus, concludes that the report is not reliable.

The Test Validity and Reliability of the Southam Survey

First, Southam News claims to have pretested all of their research instruments in Toronto, Hamilton and Belleville (Southam Newspaper Group, 1987). However, they do not mention any details about the pilot study whatsoever, and where and how they found functionally literate and illiterate adults for their pilot study remains a mystery. Without such sample subjects, no pretesting would have been possible, and the validity and reliability of the Southam testing tools for functional literacy assessment are questionable. For example, the Southam Literacy Panel arbitrarily picked ten test items out of their original 38 items without a firm basis for the construct validity of their test items. Southam News (1987) and Calamai (1987) claim to have tested functional literacy skills of their respondents, but how could they be sure whether the test items in the Southam Literacy Survey actually measured this construct?

Second, the Southam Literacy Jury Panel arbitrarily agreed that if a subject answers three or more of their ten key items wrong, then he/she is functionally illiterate; if another subject answers only two wrong, then he/she is marginal but still literate (Calamai, 1987). This kind of criterion is, for example, like saying those who can swim 100 metres are "functional swimmers," and those swimming 99 metres are not. The Southam Panel failed to present any scientific explanation as to the credibility of their literacy standard, thereby failing to validate their cut-off or passing point. Their notion that a score of 8 means the person is literate while a 7 means he/she is illiterate should be questioned.

Finally, the Southam Literacy Panel blindly believed in the reliability of their test items and did not even consider their possible measurement error. Fagan (1988), for instance, points out a discrepancy between the two versions of the survey; 28 per cent of those who took Version 1 of the Southam Survey were classified as illiterate, while 20 per cent of Version 2 takers were so labelled. These uneven figures suggest that the test scores contain a lot of measurement error, calling into question the equivalence of the two versions and the consistency of the test items. Surprisingly, however, instead of addressing possible limitations of their research results, the authors of the Southam Survey simply averaged the percentages and thus declared Canada's national functional illiteracy rate to be 24 per cent.

Population Sample Validity

Survey is a type of research that involves the use of questionnaires and/or interviews to collect data about the characteristics, knowledge, or opinions of the participants in a sample. The purpose of a survey is to generalize the findings to apply to a population that the sample is intended to represent. This focus on generalizing to a population is one of the characteristics of quantitative research. Quantitative researchers try to discover something about a large group of people by investigating a much smaller group (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Knowing that the Southam Literacy Survey is a type of quantitative research is helpful in choosing appropriate evaluation criteria.

According to Permut, Michel, and Joseph (1976), the following points are traditionally scrutinized for population sample evaluation (see also Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996):

(1) Intended sample universe, that is, the target population which the sample intends to represent;

(2) Selection procedure, including the type of sample, sample size, and geographic area;

(3) Sampling frame, that is, the population records from which the sample was chosen;

(4) Completion rate obtained, that is, the proportion of the sample that participated as intended in all of the research procedures.

As for the sampling of the Southam Literacy Survey,

(1) They made it clear that their intended target population was the entire Canadian adult population aged 18 and over;
(2) Respondents were chosen at 418 sampling centres in 148 communities and areas throughout Canada. They did not specify, however, where exactly these centres were located;
(3) Comparative information on such variables as gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, age and academic background is not satisfactorily provided. Furthermore, the degree of similarity between those who were tested and the real population is unknown;
(4) The completion rate obtained is unknown.

(Nakamura, 1998, July, pp. 70-71)

The Southam Newspaper Group formed the national picture based on a weighted sample of 1,503 from the original 2,398 (Calamai, 1987; Southam Newspaper Group, 1987). Theoretically, it is possible to make inferences from a random sample of this size to a population of well over 100 million people at a high level of accuracy (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Were the participants in the Southam Survey, however, truly randomly chosen? In determining whether or not the sample was randomly formed, we have to obtain comparative information on such variables as gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, age and academic background to see if all members of the accessible population had an equal chance of being assigned. Furthermore, we must find out the degree of similarity between those who were tested and the real population (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). The Southam Newspaper Group failed to provide an adequate sampling frame in which all of the population records are identified, nor did they show whether the breakdown of the sample population represents that of the target population. The population sample validity of this survey, therefore, may not be as high as Southam News claims to be.

The Assessment of Functional Literacy

The assessment of functional literacy used in *Literacy in Canada* (1987) does not actually apply to the styles of testing. For example, writing abilities form part of the definition of functional literacy employed in this report, but writing was not included in the ten-item test on which the Southam Literacy

Panel relied to determine their subjects' functional literacy. Furthermore, the Literacy Panel did not take the degree of complexity of different jobs, various other social skills and real-life needs into consideration. The implications of literacy in our society are far more complex and diverse than the questions in the Southam Survey can possibly handle. Without specifying a context in which literacy is to serve either individuals or groups, attempts to evaluate functional literacy will always be unsuccessful and meaningless (Graff, 1979).

NAEP and the Southam Survey

According to the Southam Newspaper Group (1987), one of the purposes of their research was "to establish a criterion measure of functional literacy for Canadian society" (p. 5). However, in the NAEP study, from which Southam News selected test items, the authors Kirsch and Jungeblut (1986) are wise enough to note that there exist no such cut-off points at which adults are labelled either literate or illiterate. The NAEP study, which is not a "functional literacy" survey after all but simply an assessment of adult Americans' literacy skills, criticizes standardized literacy tests and national literacy surveys for treating literacy as "a fixed inventory of skills that can be defined and measured by a single test, the results of which are seen as being universally applicable to a wide range of contexts" (pp. 1-2). Kirsch and Jungeblut further criticize standardized literacy tests and national survey measures for oversimplifying the nature of literacy by selecting arbitrary cut-off points below which people are labelled illiterate or functionally illiterate; the Southam Newspaper Group did just that.

The Southam Survey oversimplifies the complex and diverse nature of literacy by reducing the entire Canadian adult population into three artificial slots, namely, "illiterate," "functionally illiterate," and "literate." Conceptually, the NAEP study is fundamentally different from the Southam Survey in that NAEP recognizes the possibility of many different "literacies," thereby avoiding the establishment of arbitrary standards that distinguish functional literacy from illiteracy. Although the Southam Survey largely drew on the NAEP study, the Southam researchers misinterpreted and distorted the very essence of the NAEP report by ignoring the fact that no single measure or cut-off point on a scale can be established that distinguishes functional illiteracy from literacy (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986).

The Research Findings

The Southam literacy criteria. The Southam Newspaper

Group (1987) arbitrarily assesses functional literacy as a score of eight and over out of the ten key items which their 25-member-literacy panel designated. When 8 per cent of the university graduates in the study failed to score eight or more correct, instead of recognizing the possibility that the test items were less than reliable, they labelled these university graduates as illiterate. This is a ludicrous yet serious misinterpretation of the results. Southam claims further that 21 per cent of those who read a newspaper every day are illiterate, that more than half of the illiterates surveyed (52 per cent) read a newspaper every day, and that 87 per cent of them read a newspaper at least once a week (95 per cent for the literates), though these illiterate readers may find it difficult to understand written information in the paper. These statements are contradictory, and they call into question what Southam means by illiterate. Most ridiculous of all is that 45 per cent of "basic illiterates" in the survey read a newspaper every day (p. 135). Again, Southam News defined these "basic illiterates" as such instead of recognizing that their measurement of literacy was problematic. Thus, the discussion of results in the Southam Survey requires some serious revision.

Functional literacy and occupational status. Southam News (1987) makes a series of fundamental misinterpretations of their research findings concerning the respondents' "functional" literacy skills and occupational status. For example, according to

Southam, 90 per cent of the functional illiterates surveyed have had a job, and 44 per cent have been employed in the past 12 months, while 30 per cent are already retired. These figures suggest that, in fact, most of these supposedly dysfunctional people indeed function well in Canadian society. Moreover, Southam claims that 30 per cent of professional workers in Canada are either basically or functionally illiterate. 24 per cent of business executives, owners and managers are also illiterate. 18 per cent of clerical workers are again illiterate. These claims clearly contradict the definition of functional literacy employed in this survey.

Ethical Issues

The authors of the Southam Survey (1987) were worried that less than fully literate citizens might not be willing to participate in the study, but they failed to realize that even highly literate adults may not be too happy to spend 80 minutes struggling with five dozen literacy questions for two one-dollar lottery tickets. When conducting a survey like this, involving tests, one should consider the possibility that participants do not necessarily use their potential literacy skills to the full, that they may not take pains in order to answer every single question seriously, and that they may grow weary of completing rather irrelevant test items. Moreover, in case of the Southam Survey, because all the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, there could well have been some distraction or inconvenience during the interviews. In the data analysis and discussion sections of their report, the Southam literacy researchers do not seem to have taken the aforementioned matters into consideration (Nakamura, 1998, July).

Perhaps the more serious problem is that in order to avoid possible refusals of the interview, the Southam interviewers did not tell potential participants that they were testing Canadian adults' literacy skills, but instead the interviewers told them that they were collecting information about Canadian citizens' experiences, activities, and skills. This kind of deception is at least unethical and unacceptable.

Some Conclusions

> Today, the information-processing requirements associated with the broad range of materials and purposes people have for reading require that our nation's focus on literacy shift from one of "How many," to one recognizing the various types and levels of literacy characteristic of society today. No longer can we rely on distinctions based on the simplistic notion that "literates" and "illiterates" can be neatly pigeonholed. (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986, p. 2)

The Southam Survey and Literacy "Crisis"

First of all, the Southam Survey was based on an unquestioned assumption that some kind of test or measurement could be invented to assess a type of literacy that was universally functional for everybody (Olson, 1990). The authors of the Southam documents arbitrarily determined the functional literacy standard as answering eight or more correct out of the ten key items which their 25-member Literacy Jury Panel had designated. Olson (1990) questions the credibility of this survey as a whole using the following metaphor:

> Suppose one made up a test to discriminate mad people from normals and constructed a set of questions you thought, or assumed, to be useful for that purpose. You then gave it to inmates of institutions and to the psychiatrists working there. You found that 50% of the psychiatrists scored below your criterion. Would you then claim that 50% of psychiatrists were mad, or would you think your test may be less than perfect? (pp. 17-18)

The most perplexing of all is that the alleged overall functional illiteracy rate for Canada does not represent occupational status of the participants at all. Even the most casual look at the results of the Southam Survey attests that most of the so-called "functional illiterates" are functioning perfectly well in Canadian society, many of them even highly successful. For instance, of the functional illiterates in the survey aged 18 to 55, 86 per cent are employed. More strikingly, 19 per cent of them are professionals, and 12 per cent earn an annual income of 40,000 dollars and over (Mathews, 1989; Southam Newspaper Group, 1987). Southam News has changed these people's literacy status all of a sudden, while everything else in their lives stays the same. In fact, it is quite illogical and probably counterproductive to label three million Canadian adults functionally illiterate, including professional workers, business executives, clerical workers and those who read a newspaper every day.

Second, the Southam Newspaper Group (1987) articulates that their report intends to yield "the calculation of summary scores which would provide a comparison with the U.S. results" (p. 8). My question here is that, considering national differences in definitions and criteria, levels of industrial development, and in socio-cultural factors, what sense does it make to compare the alleged Canadian functional illiteracy rate with that of any other society, or to compare that of one sector of Canadian society with another?

Third, discussions of functional illiteracy in newspapers or magazines often sensationalize alleged deficiencies in reading, spelling, and grammar of secondary or post-secondary school students in comparison with those in other developed nations. The media has claimed that the Canadian education system may be reaching a crisis in that it is failing to prepare students adequately to meet the needs of modern sophisticated society. Whether these allegations are true or false, however, students at this level are academically far more advanced than those who have completed less than a Grade 9 level education whose needs are often overlooked (Cairns, 1977). Furthermore, Powell (1977) argues whether it is the responsibility of public schools to make everybody functional in every single vocational role. Every occupation has its own rules, regulations, and procedures. Powell argues that the unique mission of schooling is to transmit a foundation upon which literacy for any occupational training programmes can be built, and not to train for the multiplicity of occupations which change over time.

Consequences and Implications

Canada, like all other industrialized nations, does in fact have a number of adults who are enrolled in remedial literacy programmes to upgrade their skills. Reports like the Southam Literacy Survey are, however, seriously misleading and may be responsible for creating a false literacy crisis by making the sweeping claim that "100,000 illiterates a year are being added to the Canadian population by a flawed education system and humanitarian immigration policies" (Calamai, 1987, p. 8). Without thorough scrutiny, the validity and reliability of any functional literacy study should never be presumed. Literacy policy makers must verify alleged functional illiteracy levels and the conclusions based on these allegations before making any decisions affecting their policies (Phillips & Norris, 1990).

Moreover, such reports as Southam's and Calamai's seem to be falsely and recklessly generating negative images of illiteracy and illiterates by accusing them of contributing to social and economic problems. As a result, we may be delaying the progress of feasible programmes to fix the real cause of such problems. For example, Calamai (1987) speculates that Canada's billion-dollar "illiteracy bill" consists of "unnecessary UIC (Unemployment Insurance Compensation) payments," "inflated consumer prices to cover mistakes," "extra medical and worker compensation charges," "dwindling revenues for publishers (such as Southam!)," "blighted, unhappy lives for millions," and even "jail for frustrated illiterates" (p. 32). What if we misunderstand crime, for example, as a "functional" literacy problem? We are highly unlikely to solve the criminal problem by providing remedial reading lessons. Olson (1990) articulates that it is unjust to blame personal qualities of the individuals (e.g., intelligence, literacy, and education level) for social problems: "Social ills, such as poverty, unemployment, and inadequate medical care, are never simply reducible to a personal quality or characteristic of the individuals involved; they are social rather than simply psychological problems" (p. 19).

Finally, when talking about illiteracy in general, we must bear in mind that non-literate individuals are not dysfunctional but ordinary people. The results from all kinds of research, including the Southam documents, attest that so-called "illiterates" live ordinary lives and function normally in their society. Blaming illiteracy for unemployment, or any other social problem for that matter, rests upon the assumption that illiteracy necessarily makes a person a societal burden (Ilsley & Stahl, 1993). What about the productivity of illiterate, semiliterate, and non-English or French-speaking adults in factories, on farms, in service industries, in homes, and elsewhere? Discussions of illiteracy in the media typically involve "accusation, shock, disbelief and claims of falling standards" (Barton, 1994, p. 197). Speeches of well-known public figures routinely use similar sensationalism against illiteracy. This kind of atmosphere forges a false "literacy crisis" and short-term solutions to deal with it. Why resort to pompous language, exaggerated statistics, and sensational metaphors for dramatizing illiteracy to the public? Those who attempt to lead the selected audience to perceive the problem in their favourable way tend to use language strategically in advertising and public relation campaigns to compete for market share, contracts, or favourable public opinion. The way stakeholders describe literacy issues reflects their positions and purposes. Educational policy makers should pay attention to the language used by politicians and by the media to describe literacy/illiteracy (Barton, 1994; Ilsley & Stahl, 1993).

Instead of accusing university graduates and professionals of being functionally illiterate, I suggest that policy makers in Canada should critically analyze the real needs of adult citizens and devote their energy and efforts to the development of useful and necessary programmes.

CHAPTERⅣ

Literacy Issues in Japan

> Illiteracy among Burakumin has been disproportionately high. Many elderly Burakumin could not complete basic education due to the multiplying effects of discrimination in the school and poverty at home and in the community. Those illiterate adults have been trying to regain literacy in their community literacy classes. (Mori, 1995, p. 52)

Perfectly Literate Society?

1990 was the UNESCO International Literacy Year. In Japan, as in every other UNESCO member country, various public and private organizations carried out a series of activities for the advancement of literacy, and the media took up this subject for discussion. These activities were rather temporary, however, drawing little to no attention of the majority of the Japanese, who had hardly ever heard about literacy/illiteracy problems in Japan before (Kochi-ken Kyoiku Iinkai Jimukyoku Koko Kyoikuka, 1992; Kokusai Shikijinen Suishin Chuo Jikko Iinkai, 1991).

According to the Japanese Ministry of Education, the attendance rate in Japan's compulsory education has been 99.9 per cent and above for more than two decades (as of 1997)

(Monbusho, 1997). Based on this data, the government perceives illiteracy as a thing of the past or the problem of developing countries (Kokusai Shikijinen Suishin Chuo Jikko Iinkai, 1991; Motoki, 1991). Is Japan indeed a 100 per cent literate society? In this chapter, I will investigate whether Japan's literacy rate is truly 100 per cent as its government and Ministry of Education claim. I will also explore if there are any particular groups that are affected by illiteracy and whose needs are overlooked.

Brief Introduction to Written Japanese

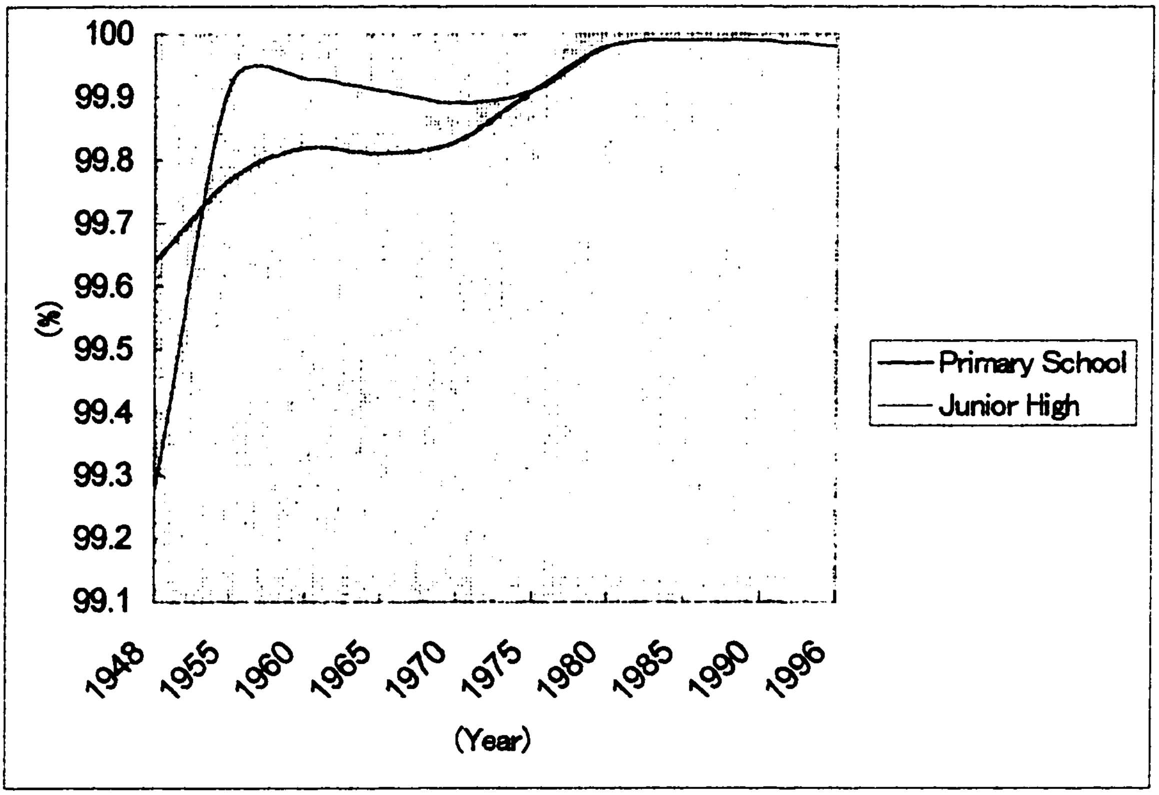
Before discussing literacy issues in Japan, perhaps it is helpful to give a brief description of written Japanese, which is quite different from English. The Japanese language consists of three types of characters, namely *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*. School children in Japan first learn hiragana, a set of 46 symbols, each representing a particular syllable. By adding diacritic marks, the number of hiragana symbols totals 71. Right after learning hiragana the children are taught another set of 46 symbols called katakana, which are most often used to write words borrowed from foreign languages. Likewise, the number of katakana increases to 71 by adding diacritic marks. Next, the school children learn pictograms (characters) called kanji, which need to be memorized singly, in combination, and in combination with hiragana to represent words and sentences. A total of 1,006 kanji characters (not words) are introduced in six years of primary schooling, and 939 more kanji are taught in three years of junior high schooling (Monbusho, 1992, 1996; Stevenson, 1987). In addition, all Japanese school children are required to learn *romaji* or the Roman alphabet in order to be able to spell out, for example, scientific notation and materials involving the Roman alphabet (Stevenson, 1987).

Behind Japan's Compulsory Education Attendance Rate

Superficial Attendance and Long-Term Absenteeism

According to Monbusho (1997) or the Japanese Ministry of Education, the attendance rate in the nine-year compulsory education in Japan has been 99.9 per cent and above since 1975. From 1979 onwards, the attendance rate has been as high as 99.98 per cent and above (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. **The attendance rate in compulsory education in Japan.**



(see Monbusho, 1997, p. 36)

Japan's claim to have no literacy problems is based solely on the nation's high attendance rate in compulsory education (Kokusai Shikijinen Suishin Chuo Jikko Iinkai, 1991; Motoki, 1991). What do these figures really tell us, though? According to Saito (1991), the national attendance rate in compulsory education in Japan is calculated as follows:

Figure 4. **The calculation of the national attendance rate.**

The Number of Enrolments on the School Register
÷
The Number of School-Age Children in the Population
(Saito, 1991, p. 59)

Saito (1991) points out that once a student is on the school register, he or she is considered a school attendant even though he/she may or may not actually attend school at all. In other words, however high the long-term absence and dropout rates may be, they will not lower the compulsory school attendance rate in any way. Although the initial enrolment rate may be, as the Ministry of Education claims, close to perfect, the total number of school absentees accounted for 1.2 per cent of the total number of students in 1991, according to my calculation. This percentage had increased to 1.5 per cent by 1995. Note that a surprisingly large number of junior high school students became long-term absentees (see Tables 2, 3, and 4).

Table 2

Enrolment in Japanese Compulsory Education

Year	Total	Elementary	Junior High
1991	14,345,743	9,157,429	5,188,314
1992	13,984,066	8,947,226	5,036,840
1993	13,619,018	8,768,881	4,850,137
1994	13,264,037	8,582,871	4,681,166
1995	12,940,636	8,370,246	4,570,390

(Monbusho, 1997, p. 27)

Table 3

Long-Term Absenteeism (a total of 30 days and more absences annually)

Year	Total	Elementary	Junior High
1991	174,019	65,234	103,069
1992	185,003	70,746	108,375
1993	181,113	67,517	108,086
1994	188,828	70,598	112,601
1995	193.342	71,047	116,778

(Monbusho, 1997, p. 35)

Table 4

Percentage of Absenteeism

Year	Total	Elementary	Junior High
1991	1.2%	0.7%	2.0%
1992	1.3%	0.8%	2.2%
1993	1.3%	0.8%	2.2%
1994	1.4%	0.8%	2.4%
1995	1.5%	0.8%	2.6%

Japanese public primary and junior high schools are said to have a nation-wide tendency to allow most of their long-term absentee students to graduate on time even if they have not completed all the academic requirements (Saito, 1991). Consequently, these students superficially graduate without acquiring adequate scholastic abilities, and once they graduate they will not easily find a similar opportunity to receive formal education equivalent to compulsory education. Of course, a number of jobs will always be available which do not require sophisticated academic abilities. It is not difficult to imagine, however, that these students' choices of career may be significantly restricted when they enter the job market.

School-Age Children Not Attending Compulsory Education

I also wish to call attention to the number of school-age children who are annually exempted from or postpone attending compulsory education in Japan. The reasons for exemption or postponement are, physical and/or mental disabilities, illness, institutionalization, and others (Monbusho, 1997). Table 5 shows the numbers of school-age children who did not attend compulsory education. Figure 5 also shows the change in numbers over the years. Note that since 1993 the number of such students has been on the increase.

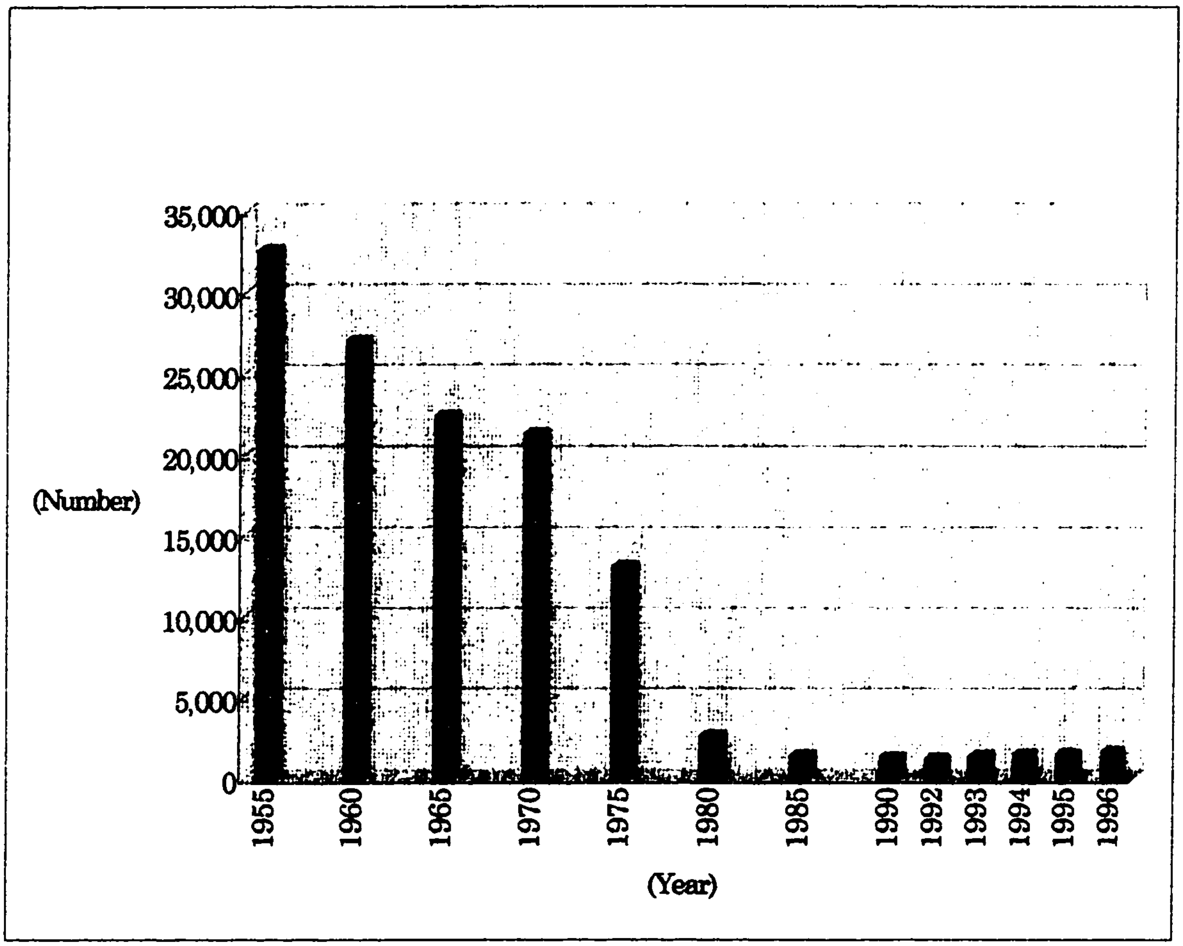
Table 5

School-Age Children Not Attending Compulsory Education in Japan

Year	Total	Exempt from Schooling			Postponed Schooling		
		Subtotal	Primary Age 6-11	Junior High Age12-14	Subtotal	Primary Age 6-11	Junior High Age12-14
1955	32,630	6,428	4,241	2,187	26,202	23,697	2,505
1960	26,998	9,187	6,786	2,401	17,811	16,208	1,603
1965	22,383	9,685	6,182	3,503	12,698	11,216	1,482
1970	21,283	9,770	6,502	3,268	11,513	9,811	1,702
1975	13,088	5,584	3,262	2,322	7,504	5,726	1,778
1980	2,593	713	413	300	1,880	1,362	518
1985	1,388	203	120	83	1,185	619	566
1990	1,238	223	128	95	1,015	476	539
1992	1,224	283	180	103	941	529	412
1993	1,336	341	233	108	995	581	414
1994	1,456	379	256	123	1,077	633	444
1995	1,511	393	283	110	1,118	661	457
1996	1,589	470	332	138	1,119	659	460

(Monbusho, 1997, p. 34)

Figure 5. **School-age children not attending compulsory education in Japan.**



(Monbusho, 1997, p. 34)

Evening Classes at Junior High Schools

In the chaos of Japanese society during and shortly after the Second World War, a substantial number of school-age children had to work to survive instead of going to school. In 1947, a group of concerned teachers in Osaka started to offer junior high school level evening classes to those who had lost opportunities to receive compulsory education.

This trend of evening classes had continued and become nation-wide until 1951, when the Ministry of Education officially announced that the School Education Act does not allow public junior high schools to offer such evening classes. In 1966, Gyoseikanricho or the Administrative Management Agency released a recommendation of early closure of junior high school evening classes for the same reason. Thus, evening classes at junior high school are not officially recognized educational opportunities in Japan (Motoki, 1991).

As of 1989, nevertheless, 2,686 students were registered in evening classes at 34 junior high schools nation-wide that offered nine subjects, including Japanese, social studies, mathematics, science, music, fine arts, physical education, woodworking/domestic science, and English (see Table 6). Since many of these students have not finished even elementary school, however, their primary objective is to learn such basic literacy skills as reading and writing kanji characters (Saito, 1991).

Table 7 shows the students' reasons for not finishing their schooling:

Table 6

Junior High School Evening Classes (as of 1989)

Municipality	Number of Schools	Number of Students
Tokyo	8	382
Kanagawa	6	36
Chiba	1	21
Kyoto	1	95
Osaka	10	1750
Nara	2	147
Hyogo	3	123
Hiroshima	3	132
Total	34	2,686

(Saito, 1991, p. 49)

Table 7

Reasons for Not Finishing Compulsory Education among Students Enrolled in Junior High School Evening Classes (as of April 10, 1990)

Reasons	Number
Family Poverty	945
Lack of Parental Encouragement	339
Dysfunctional Family	51
Family Illness	27
Students' Illness	100
Students' Dislike of School	110
Repatriation from Overseas (see Hikiagesha)	416
Other	531
Total	2,519

(Monbusho, 1990, cited in Saito, 1991, p. 51)

Hikiagesha in Japan

Hikiagesha or repatriates in Japan usually refer to those who returned to Japan from China after the Second World War. Many of them have never received formal education and understand little or no Japanese. Upon returning to Japan, repatriates have an opportunity to brush up on their Japanese or learn it from scratch at a support centre for a certain period of time. Since the duration of the training is not always adequate, those who did not acquire enough language skills seek to attend evening classes at junior high schools, whose existence is virtually unknown to the general public. No other public literacy classes are currently available (Saito, 1991).

The Burakumin and Literacy

> Because I didn't go to school, I wasn't bullied. — A Buraku woman in Fukuoka. (Furukawa, 1991, p. 8)

> "It is all right if you can't get to school," said my parents. I didn't want to go, either, and had to work anyway. Naturally, I stopped school. — A Buraku literacy student in Osaka. (Uchiyama, 1991, p. 51)

Behind Japan's claim to have the world's highest schooling attendance rate, the Burakumin, the largest minority group in Japan, are still severely discriminated against—the discrimination being so severe that people like the above quoted woman feel glad that she did not attend school (Furukawa, 1991). Buraku liberation movements have been promoting literacy education for adults based on the belief that "the literacy movement is the foundation of the liberation movement" (Mori, 1995, p. 52). Buraku leaders point out that discrimination against the Burakumin has significantly prevented them from attaining equal educational opportunities. As a result, the non-literate population in Japan is disproportionately concentrated in Buraku communities (Motoki, 1991; Uchiyama, 1991). Therefore, when discussing literacy/illiteracy issues in Japan, one cannot overlook the Burakumin.

Brief History of the Burakumin

Unlike North America, Japan is generally believed to be homogeneous society with an iron-tight immigration law, thereby preventing the development of a racial and cultural mosaic. For the most part, therefore, Japan tends to regard minority phenomena as only temporary. Unaccustomed to problems of any minority, Japanese society seems uneasy about the *Burakumin*, the largest minority group in Japan (Cornell, 1967). According to some sources (e.g., Hawkins, 1983; Hirasawa, 1983a; Shimahara, 1991), there are over one million Burakumin in Japan. However, the precise number of those who currently belong to the Burakumin category is unclear, the reason being that, officially, the practice of identifying people as such was abandoned at the time of the 1871 Meiji Restoration (Hane, 1982).

Burakumin literally means "village (*buraku*) people (*min*)," which replaced such previously used derogatory terms as *eta* (defilement abundant) or *hinin* (non-human) (Shimahara, 1991, pp. 329-330). The Burakumin are said to have been engaged in such occupations as burying the dead, and skinning and tanning the hides of animals (De Vos & Wagatsuma, 1973; Donoghue, 1971; Hawkins, 1983; Hirasawa, 1983a; Shimahara, 1991). Hawkins (1983) states that for over 1,000 years in Japan, association with certain ritual impurities was believed to defile and pollute the nature of people spiritually, and this pollution was both hereditary and communicable. In the ninth and tenth centuries, Buddhism, which was brought in from China and Korea, merged with the Japanese native Shintoism, generating occupational stratification: occupations associated with blood and death were perceived as impure (Donoghue, 1971; Hawkins, 1983). The association with blood and death is defiling from a Shinto point of view, and killing animals is against Buddhist tradition. Even today, the Burakumin are still a class apart from the average Japanese, who are careful not to marry them, thereby "polluting" their own blood lines (Hendry, 1995, p. 82).

According to Shimahara (1991), the Edo period (1603-1867) rigidified the hierarchy in which individual status, occupation, and residence were ascribed as permanently unchangeable, thereby laying the foundation of the social structure of the Burakumin today. The Edo status system consisted of aristocrats, farmers, artisans, merchants, and pariahs, who were placed outside the strata as "untouchables" (p. 330). The so-called pariahs were required to live in segregated villages, wear designated clothes, slippers, and hairstyles, stay out of commoners' communities, and stay in their "hovels" at night (p. 330). According to Donoghue (1971), those who had no "proper" communities or social status (e.g., beggars, criminals, and vagabonds) also found refuge in the "special communities" (p. 113). Although the pariahs were socially rejected, they continued to serve practical economic purposes, particularly during the period of continuous inter-feudal warfare prior to the Edo era. The pariahs who produced leather armours essential for warfare were as useful for warlords as farmers and samurai warriors for the survival of the territories.

In 1615, when Tokugawa Ieyasu triumphed in unifying the entire nation, peace set in, diminishing the Burakumin's importance as armour producers. In order to stabilize the social and economic system, the Edo government imposed severely oppressive laws on the general population, including the Burakumin. Upward social mobility was non-existent so that no one could leave the position in life into which he/she had been born (Shimahara, 1991).

In August 1871, the Meiji Restoration finally put an end to the 264 year-Edo period, ushering Japan into its modern era (Hawkins, 1983). At the outset of the Meiji era (1868-1913), when the nation's population was an estimated 33 million, approximately 400,000 people had some sort of "outcaste" status (Hane, 1982, p. 139). Four years later, the government declared the emancipation of outcastes, who then became known as shinheimin or "new commoners" (p. 330). Although they were officially freed from the outcaste status, the new commoners continued to suffer from long-standing culturally embedded prejudices. Many of them stayed in segregated communities, and remained in their historical occupations, relying on traditional social ties.

Education and the Burakumin

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to Shimahara (1991), formal education in Japan became a powerful sorting system that allotted people to suitable slots in society. As Japanese society became more and more industrialized, the significance of education kept pace. The Burakumin, however, still received minimal education and, consequently, had little upward social mobility. As late as the early 1960's, Buraku students were infamous for their poor academic performance and high dropout, truancy, and delinquency rates. As of 1973, overall 64 per cent of Buraku children received the compulsory level education, compared with close to 95 per cent for the Japanese in general. Educational conditions for the Burakumin are said to have improved in the 1980's, but exact figures remain elusive (Hawkins, 1983).

The poverty in which Buraku children have typically been raised, and the continuous discriminations and insults they experience have resulted in both material deprivation and severe psychological burden. For most Buraku children, attending school with non-Buraku students has often been a fearful and traumatic experience, because this is when they first encounter such blunt discrimination as verbal abuse, insults, and even physical assaults by their schoolmates (Hane, 1982). After compulsory education (junior high school), Buraku students have typically entered such manual industries as shoe making, automobile and general machine repair, and iron, meat, and textile production (Shimahara, 1991).

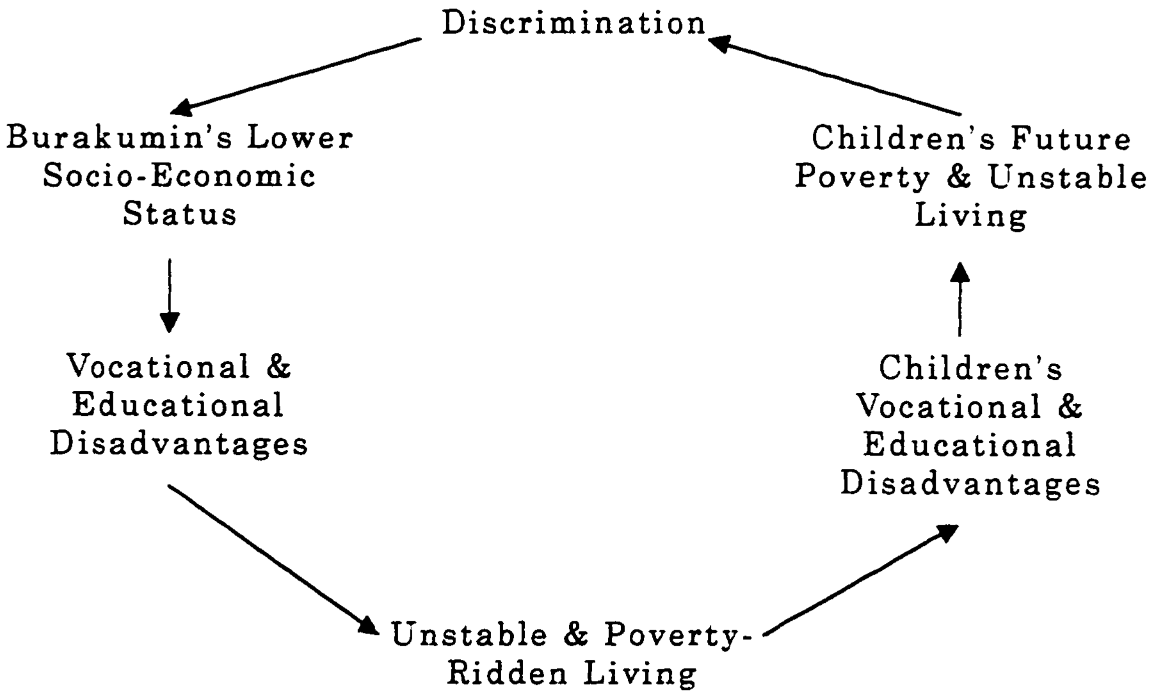
Minority Status and Literacy in Japan

There have been hardly any literacy surveys conducted in Japan, and those few conducted were done in Buraku communities (Motoki, 1991). In 1990, for example, Osaka municipal government conducted a survey concerning the state of education in its 48 Buraku communities, and the results are striking. Of the 64,076 Buraku people interviewed aged 15 and over, 41,000 or 6.4 per cent did not attend compulsory education at all or left primary school. 10,829 or 16.9 per cent finished primary school or equivalent but did not complete junior high school. Altogether 10,829 or 23.3 per cent of these Buraku people did not complete compulsory education, which is the completion of junior high school. Furthermore, of the 64,076, 1,745 or 2.5 per cent stated that they cannot read at all, and 2,513 or 3.6 per cent also confessed that they are completely unable to write. An additional 3.7 per cent stated that they can read only hiragana and katakana, and 5.1 per cent said they can write only in hiragana and katakana (Osaka-fu Kikakuka Choseibu Dowa Taisakushitsu, 1991).

Compulsory education, of course, starts when a student enters primary school. Literacy education, however, begins much earlier at home and in the community. Naturally, the child's acquisition of literacy depends largely on his/her family, neighbourhood, and community. Family inevitably plays the most important role when children learn literacy informally. Neighbourhood and community, where people share common local issues, gives children support. In case of the Burakumin, however, discrimination against them over the generations has deprived them of equal vocational and educational opportunities, thereby forcing them into lower socio-economic positions. Consequently, there have been a number of Buraku people who were not able to fully attend compulsory education as children due to societal discrimination and severe poverty at home and in the community as a whole (Furukawa, 1991; Mori, 1995).

Nakano (1991) explains the institutionalized discrimination against the Burakumin:

Figure 6. **The vicious circle of discrimination against the Burakumin.**


Discrimination
Burakumin's Lower Socio-Economic Status
Vocational & Educational Disadvantages
Unstable & Poverty-Ridden Living
Children's Vocational & Educational Disadvantages
Children's Future Poverty & Unstable Living

(pp. 139-140)

Buraku Liberation Movements and Literacy Education

Buraku literacy movements gained momentum in the 1960's. They are said to have begun with a group of teachers in Fukuoka prefecture who discovered that a large portion of their long-term absentees were Buraku children. After paying repeated visits to their homes, these teachers found out that many of the parents were unable to read, for example, newsletters from school. The teachers, along with Buraku organizations, formed literacy classes. Today, about 600 literacy classes are said to be offered in Buraku communities, most of which are located in the western part of Japan (Furukawa, 1991; Mori, 1995; Uchiyama, 1991). Buraku participants in literacy classes are typically called "living witnesses to discrimination" (Mori, 1995, p. 53). The existence of Buraku literacy students sheds light on the failure of the Japanese education system, or Japanese society as a whole for that matter, to provide Buraku children with equal educational opportunities.

Literacy in Slum Neighbourhoods

Major industrialized cities in Japan typically have "labour-neighbourhoods," where tens of thousands of physical labourers gather, looking for work. Airin-chiku in Osaka is the largest of such labour-neighbourhoods, followed by Sanya in Tokyo and Kotobuki-cho in Yokohama (Osawa, 1991, p. 93). The exact number of daily-paid labourers in these cities are unknown due to the fluid nature of labour demands, coupled with the fact that most of these labourers, including seasonal workers from out of town, stay in cheap hostels and temporary shelters rather than permanent housing.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, mobile physical labourers contributed significantly to Japan's miraculous economic growth: the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, the construction of the Shinkansen or Bullet Train Systems, and the International Exposition in Osaka, to name but a few (Osawa, 1991).

The chaos after the Second World War created a large number of homeless youths and children who were supposed to be in school instead of on streets. The societal conditions of those days in Japan, however, valued labour over education, and it was nothing but ordinary for school-age children to enter the newly emerging industrialized labour market, namely Tokyo and Osaka, to make a living (Osawa, 1991).

Interview with a Policeman in Airin-chiku

Officer Suzuki (pseudonym) was 25 years old when he was transferred to Nishinari ward, Osaka, in which Airin district is located. He worked in this ward from 1989 to 1990 as a patrol officer. Suzuki told me about his experience with non-literate adults in Airin labour-neighbourhoods:

> Almost every day, I encountered illiterate adults, mostly 50 years old or over, including petty criminal

> offenders and their victims. It was the first time in my life that I had ever seen illiterate adults, which came to me as quite a big surprise. I had always believed that everyone in Japan could read and write. That's what politicians and the Education Minister tell us, anyway. The reality in Airin-chiku was, however, somewhat different. It was, in fact, rather rare for me to meet people, who could write their own names legibly, making them feel hesitant to report any crime to the police. They told me they were afraid of going anywhere, namely the police station, where they might be required to read or write something. It was also difficult for the police to handle crimes involving illiterate people, whether they were offenders themselves or victims. In Japan, the police write crime reports and testimonies for all offenders and victims regardless of their literacy skills, but they at least have to sign in their names to certify that everything in the written report or testimony is correct. What can you do if you can hardly sign your own name let alone comprehend what the report or testimony says?

Both Japanese government agencies and the general public alike take it for granted that illiteracy problems are non-existent in Japan (Kokusai Shikijinen Suishin Chuo Jikko Iinkai, 1991; Ozawa, 1991). Officer Suzuki, however, talks further about the gap between Japan's supposed perfect literacy rate and the reality involving people he encountered in Airin-chiku:

> These illiterate people are indeed unfortunate and now largely forgotten. A non-literate female victim of a theft once confessed to me that, in the aftermath of the Second World War, she had no choice but to work to make a living, thereby losing her opportunity to attend compulsory education. She became capable of writing her name after having taken a basic literacy class at a local private religious organization. Why does the government

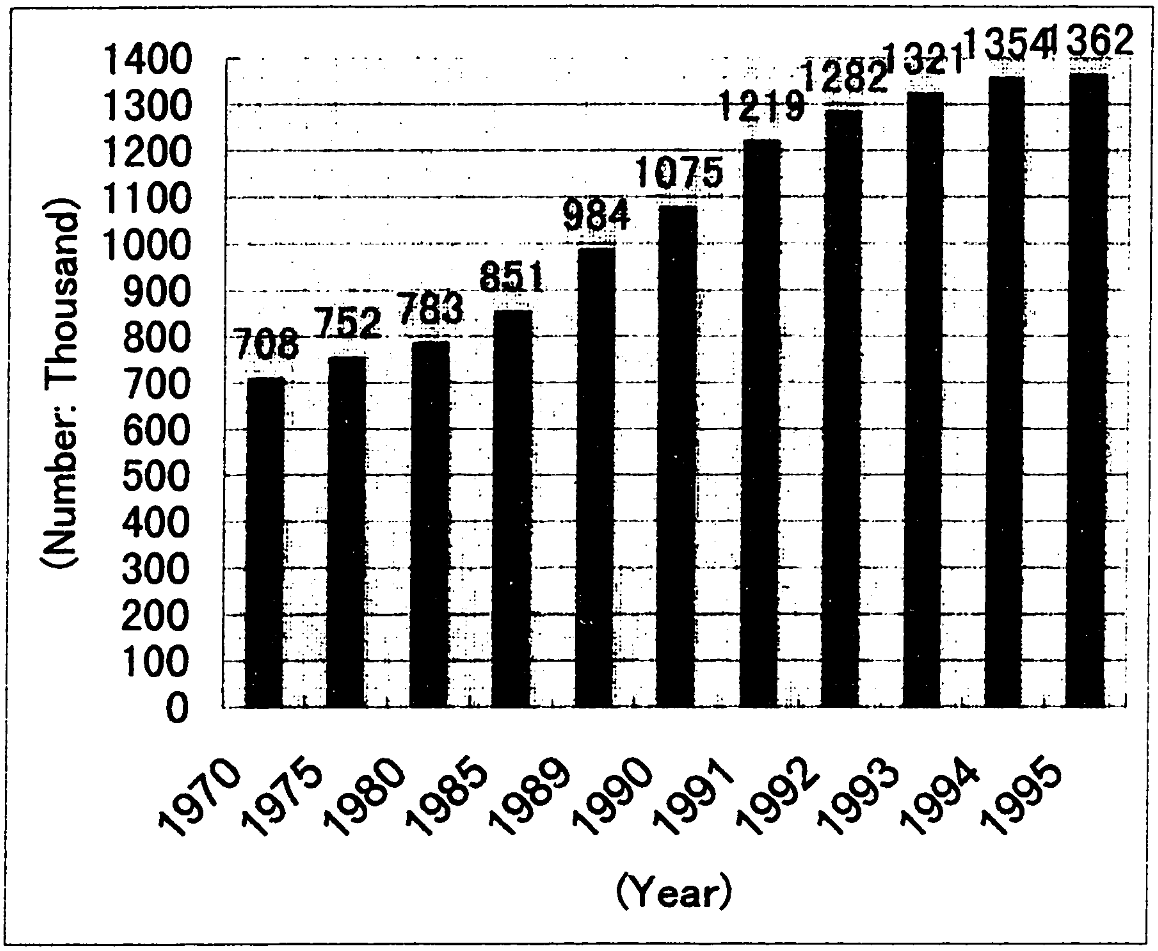
> not offer any literacy courses in Airin-chiku? Politicians say Japan's literacy rate is 100 per cent? That is nothing but a myth! No police officers working in this ward would buy it.

Literacy and Foreigners in Japan

The growing number of foreigners in Japan should be taken into consideration. Perhaps such a sweeping categorization as "foreigners in Japan" may be inappropriate or even misleading, because many different kinds of people, who have different cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds, would be included in this category: permanent residents of Korean descent, spouses of Japanese citizens, immigrant workers, and refugees, to name but a few (Ono, 1991). In this section of the thesis, I will focus on non-Japanese people who require Japanese language education.

Foreigners staying in Japan for more than 90 days are registered by local municipal governments. In 1995, the number of registered foreigners reached its highest ever, 1,362,371 or 1.08 per cent of the Japanese population (see Figure 7). Likewise, the number of foreign-born children, who require basic Japanese language education, in primary and junior high schools in Japan is on the increase (see Table 8 and Figure 8) (Somucho Gyosei Kansatsukyoku, 1997).

Figure 7. The number of registered foreigners in Japan.



(Somucho Gyosei Kansatsukyoku, 1997, p. 9)

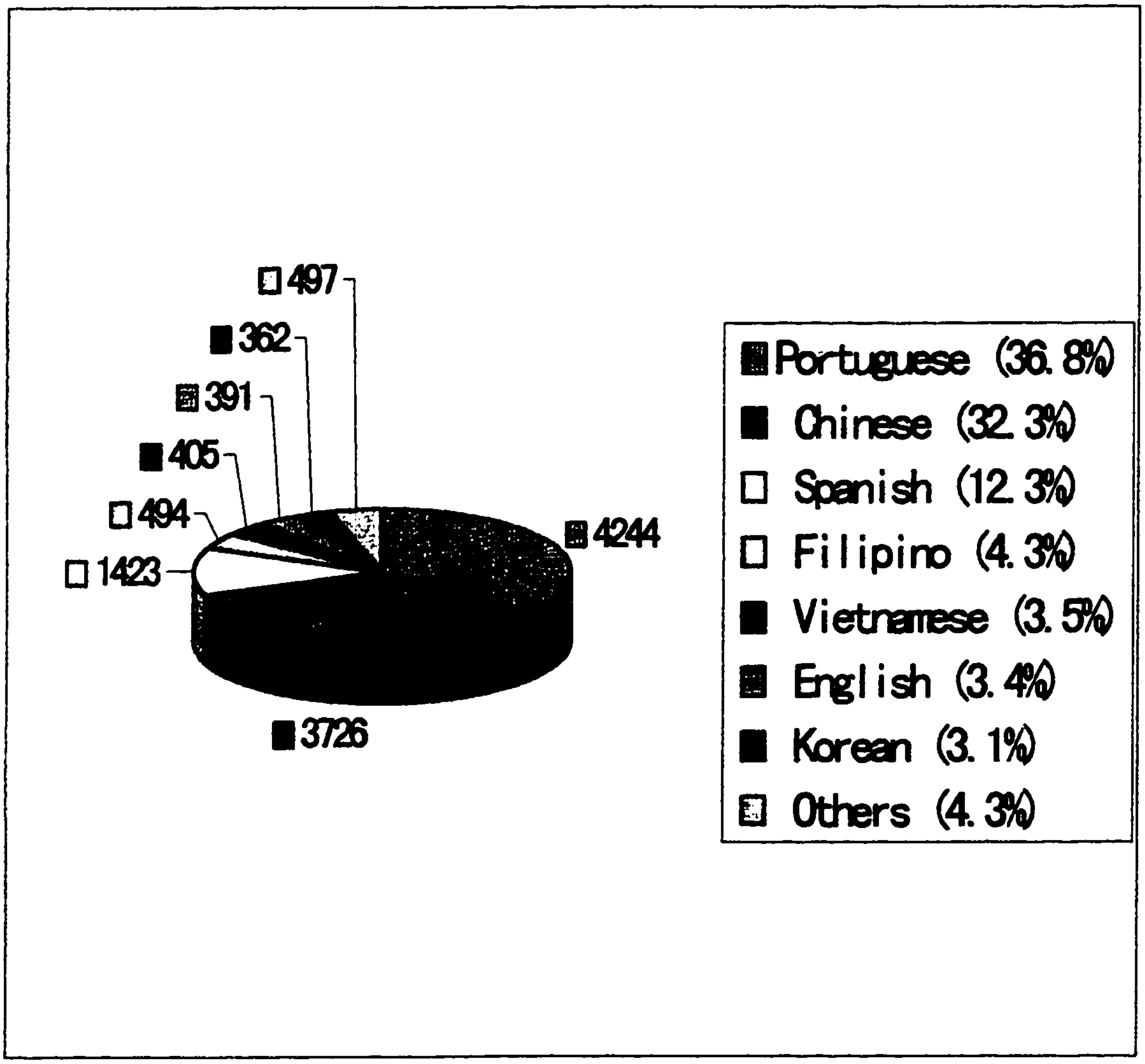
Table 8

The Number of Foreign Children Requiring Japanese Language Education in Primary and Junior High Schools

Year	School	Total Number of Students	Foreign Students	%	Total Number of Schools	Schools with Foreign Students	%
1991	Primary	9.157.429	3.978	0.04	24.798	1.437	5.8
	Junior	5.188.314	1.485	0.03	11.290	536	4.7
	Total	14.345.743	5.463	0.04	36.088	1.973	5.5
1993	Primary	8.768.881	7.569	0.09	24.676	2.611	10.6
	Junior	4.850.137	2.881	0.06	11.292	1.094	9.7
	Total	13.619.018	10.450	0.08	35.968	3.705	10.3
1995	Primary	8.370.246	8.192	0.10	24.548	2.611	10.6
	Junior	4.570.390	3.350	0.07	11.274	1.237	11.0
	Total	12.940.636	11.542	0.09	35.822	3.848	10.7

(Somucho Gyosei Kansatsukyoku, 1997, p. 12)

Figure 8. **The linguistic breakdown of foreign students attending compulsory education in Japan.**



(Somucho Gyosei Kansatsukyoku, 1997, p. 12)

According to Somucho Gyosei Kansatsukyoku or the Supervisory Division of the Management and Co-ordination Agency (1997), a large number of primary and junior high schools in Japan give both their Japanese and non-Japanese students a uniform education regardless of their Japanese language abilities, thereby overlooking the linguistic difficulties of foreign-born children. The educational and literacy needs of non-Japanese speakers from various cultural backgrounds are diverse. The Japanese Ministry of Education does not provide adequate support to teachers who are looking for tools and methods to teach students learning Japanese as a second language. Especially for speakers of languages with non-pictographic writing systems, learning the Japanese language is a monumental task.

Some Conclusions

Years of Schooling and Literacy

"Literacy problems have been completely solved in Japan" (Saito, 1991, p. 60). The Ministry of Education has been thus replying to UNESCO, based on Japan's superficial attendance rate in compulsory education. To begin with, the attendance rates do not reflect the reality of long-term absenteeism.

Furthermore, can we define literacy as the number of years of schooling completed (e.g., the nine-year compulsory education in Japan)? Although some correlation seems to exist between the years of schooling and literacy abilities, some researchers doubt the usefulness of such an index (see Graff, 1979; Heathington, 1987; Hillerich, 1976). According to Dauzat and Dauzat (1977), for example, it is a false assumption that those who complete certain years of schooling necessarily have the proficiency level to handle most reading and writing tasks with comfort. On the other hand, such a definition precludes the possibility of people being literate without attending school. Many historical and biographical reports attest to the numerous highly literate individuals with little or no formal education. Hillerich (1976) argues that grade levels in primary school probably reflect age more than academic attainment. For instance, a sixth-grader may be reading at a first grade level or at a high school level. Thus, a perfect attendance rate in schooling does not necessarily equal a perfect literacy rate.

Long-Term Absenteeism and Literacy

Retention of students should be one of the main goals of educational planners in Japan. The term educational "wastage" is commonly used in the literature on international and comparative education (Wagner, 1987, p. 9). This term characterizes the loss, usually by dropping out, of students who do not complete what is supposed to be the minimum educational curriculum of a given society. The concept of wastage typically refers to those students for whom economic investments in education have been made, but who, literally, waste these investments by not finishing the required level of schooling. When students become long-term absentees or drop-outs, their society wastes its resources, because these students have not reached some required threshold of minimum learning, and consequently, what has been acquired will not be sustained.

Japan's Perception of Literacy

The most striking aspect of literacy issues in Japan is not that illiteracy does indeed exist but that literacy issues are so completely ignored. There is a widespread sense across the nation that illiteracy is the problem of developing countries (Kokusai Shikijinen Suishin Chuo Jikko Iinkai, 1991; Motoki, 1991). Many specialists (e.g., Kozel, 1985; Ozawa, 1991) argue, however, that even the world's most industrialized countries, including G7 nations, have not yet solved their literacy problems. In Japan, on the other hand, it has been a "common belief" that illiteracy is a thing of the past (Ozawa, 1991, p. 221). The

Japanese government should, however, realize that it is unrealistic to claim that Japan alone has no literacy problems whatsoever without launching plausible literacy studies. The ease of defining literacy by the number of years of schooling may be the reason for its frequent use as a measure, but such a criterion hardly helps adult literacy students improve their literacy skills. To begin with, the government needs to acknowledge the possibility of the existence of literacy problems in Japan.

CHAPTER V

Discussion and Conclusions

The Fallacy of Functional Literacy

From Literacy to Literacies

Although literacy may be one of the central features of formal learning in school, in our daily life, literacy is not the main purpose of activities but is used instead to get things done; literacy itself is not evaluated and is successful as long as it fulfils its purposes. How can we test something as arbitrary as this? Why must one be either functionally "literate" or "illiterate"? Considering the fact that different people, different cultures, different occupations, in different communities require different kinds of "literacies," it is meaningless to attempt to develop a simplistic pass-fail assessment tool, which is "applied like a knife" to cut the population into the "literate" and the "illiterate" (Hillerich, 1976, p. 54).

Highly industrialized society takes it for granted that illiterate individuals are unable to function competently and independently. However, when literacy is considered only one of many skills required in our social networks, illiteracy does not necessarily refer to incompetence and dysfunction (Fingeret, 1983). Ogbu (1981) also argues that most children naturally grow up as competent adults, that is, they grow up to be literate adults in literate society. In a relatively stable population, Ogbu states, children are taught more or less the same set of skills or competencies, which have had prior existence in that population. Competencies are taught through culturally standardized techniques, which are designed to ensure both the survival of children into adulthood and their acquisition of the competencies essential for their adult tasks. People are motivated to instil competencies by societal rewards for competence and penalties for incompetence.

Illiterate ≠ Dysfunctional

Fingeret (1983) conducted 12 months of fieldwork involving observations and interviews with 43 non-literate adults in a medium-sized urban American city in order to find out how they consider their social relationships and the role of literacy in their daily life. Fingeret discovered that many of the illiterate adults interviewed consider literacy to be merely one of the many knowledge resources that are necessary for everyday life. The subjects in this study have created a web of social networks that are characterized by mutual support and security. They can obtain most of the required resources from their social networks, and in return, they contribute various skills and knowledge other than reading and writing to their networks. Fingeret concludes that, although so-called "illiterate" adults are typically considered to be unable to function, this perception conflicts with their own experience in society, and that despite the disadvantage of not being able to utilize written information, this barrier is insufficient to subjugate otherwise competent and functional adults.

Functional Literacy "Crisis" in Canada?

Politicians, educational planners, literacy advocates and the media alike strongly claim that literacy is absolutely imperative to competence and independence in our sophisticated modern society. Consequently, illiterate adults are defined in terms of incompetence, dependence, and inability. For instance the term "functional literacy" implies that illiterates are also "dysfunctional," but this is not necessarily the case.

The term "functional literacy" has been coined in order to illustrate the distinct literacy problems in modern complex society. Behind the use of this term lies the idea that though people may have acquired basic literacy, they have to have higher literacy skills to deal with written information in highly industrialized countries like Canada. Barton (1994) points out, however, that the use of this term is contradictory; on the one hand, it represents some minimal level of performance necessary for day-to-day situations and, on the other hand, it also involves specific job-related tasks.

In spite of the poor validity and reliability of *Literacy in Canada* (1987) and *Broken Words* (1987), both have had and will probably continue to have considerable influence on the Canadian media. Two particular disturbing images have been forged by the Southam documents, namely, "the image of Canada as an illiterate nation, and the image of the adult illiterate" (Fagan, 1988, p. 228). With an illiteracy rate of 24 per cent, which Southam claims to be a conservative figure, Canada ranks behind many countries, including developing nations. This image is seriously troublesome when considering Canada's overall economic standards, social status, and the political influence in the international community.

Is Japan's literacy rate truly 100 per cent?

According to Shimahara (1991), since the establishment of compulsory education early in the Meiji period, schooling has been considered crucial for social and economic advancement in Japan. While almost uncritically praising Japan's education system as "effective," "equal," and "problem-free," Japanese politicians, administrators, and educators have often failed to acknowledge mounting hidden educational problems in the nation (Hirasawa, 1983b, p. 18). When Japan's miraculous economic growth reached its peak, the nation's supposedly brilliant education system started to reveal its uglier aspects. Among the problems were the discrimination against, and low academic achievements of the Buraku students, problems which persist today.

The Japanese government and the Ministry of Education claim, based on the 99.9 per cent attendance rate in compulsory education, that Japan has no illiteracy problem (Kokusai Shikijinen Suishin Chuo Jikko Iinkai, 1991; Motoki, 1991). However, what about tens of thousands of students who become part of the statistics for long-term absenteeism? Japanese educational policy makers cannot be sure, for example, that the 116,778 or 2.6 per cent of junior high school students who are long-term absentees are fully literate (see Chapter Ⅳ)? What about the school-age children who are, for different kinds of reasons, not fortunate enough to attend school? Where and how are these children supposed to receive formal literacy education? Unlike Canada, where literacy courses are readily available in various locations both public and private, Japan cannot escape from the criticism that it has been largely neglecting those who have missed the opportunity to receive formal education and have been seeking help. Especially with the long-term absenteeism rate so high and rising, Japanese educational policy makers can no longer afford to be content with attendance rate statistics.

Concluding Remarks

In both countries, the true needs of those who are excluded from literate resources of their cultures seem obscured: in Canada by misidentification of the real problem, and in Japan by denial that a problem exists. Since functional illiteracy in Canada has become a media-exaggerated concern, various groups (e.g., adult education specialists, politicians, business leaders, religious leaders, newspaper publishers, and educators working with learning disabled or cognitively challenged individuals) have shown interest in defining both illiteracy and its possible solutions. Ilsley and Stahl (1993) point out that, in each context, there is a different view on what it means to be literate, depending upon the parties involved. Different stakeholders also express different expectations of people as to how literate they should be. At any rate, the way stakeholders portray literacy issues closely represents their interests, and educational policy makers need to take a careful look at how literacy is portrayed.

In contrast, Japanese society as a whole lacks basic awareness of its internal literacy problems, particularly those involving the Burakumin. It is problematic for the Japanese government to claim that they completely solved illiteracy years ago while there are actually people taking literacy classes today. Japanese society and its education system should do their best to provide the minority groups with equal educational opportunities.

Despite the fact that Japan is not immune to literacy problems existing elsewhere in the world, educational policy makers in Japan have been showing little interest in literacy studies, which involve many different areas of disciplines. Japanese society will not solve its unique literacy problems by ignoring them. It is essential that the government admit to the possibility of literacy problems in the country.

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