

## ILD UNESCO 2023

### ‘Promoting literacy for a world in transition: Building the foundation for sustainable and peaceful societies.’

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Decades ago, Ivan Illich argued that to change the existing understanding of education required elaborating a new narrative “a new powerful tale, one so persuasive that it sweeps away the old myths and becomes the preferred story.” (Apud Springer, 2016, p.2) In a world in transition, the weaving of a new narrative for education and literacy is a fundamental part of the challenge. This challenge involves a process of learning – understanding the roots of the problem, learning to unlearn – long-established beliefs which are proven not to be valid, and relearning – recognising the existence of other epistemologies, other ways of knowing besides the dominant western epistemologies. Paulo Freire’s seminal work, in Brazil, in the 1950s and 60s is an eloquent example of this search for a new narrative, in which literacy is part of a broad understanding of education and culture. Freire’s intention was not to create a new literacy method but a new all-embracing epistemology.

The report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education, the Marrakech Framework of Action, endorsed by participants at the VII Confintea, in June 2022, and the report of the Transforming Education Summit (TES, 2022) all register the impact of the awareness of existential threats to humanity posed by climate change, pollution and the loss of biodiversity. The Futures of Education Report states that: “We already know that knowledge and learning are the basis for renewal and transformation... But to shape peaceful, just, and sustainable futures, education itself must be transformed” (UNESCO, 2021, p.5). As the UN Report **Transforming Education: An urgent political imperative for our collective future** states, “In a world that is experiencing a fourth industrial revolution, nearly half of all students do not complete secondary school and 763 million young people and adults are illiterate, the majority of whom are women” (UN, 2022 p.1.) The same report recognises that education remains in “deep crisis”, a “crisis of equity, quality, and relevance” (UN, 2022, p. 3). In other words, it is not sufficient to propose more of the same.

How, then, to qualify this notion of a world in transition?

Clearly all processes of transition are painful in that they mark the passing from established certainties to the realms of uncertainty, what Gramsci called a period of interregnum between the old state, which is dying, and the new state, which is struggling to be born (1982). I suggest five initial characteristics:

- First, the transition from an anthropocentric vision of the world to a biocentric vision of the world. From a world in which humans are at the centre, to a holistic vision of the world in which humans and nature or more-than-humans, are embodied as part of an integrated and interdependent system.
- Second, the transition from an education dominated by a humanitarian charter

(notion of human exceptionalism) to one of ecological justice.

- Third, a shift from learning **about** the world to learning **with** the world (UNESCO, 2020).
- Fourth, a redimensioning of what constitutes humanity in relation to more-than-humanity.
- Fifth, the transition from universality (one size fits all) to pluriversality. Munir Fasheh suggests that universalism more than any other tenet has been the cause of eliminating diversity, which constitutes the essence of life (UNESCO/MEC, 2005, p. 142).

The lack of progress with regard to the 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development, for which the world's poorest and most vulnerable people are bearing the brunt, reflects multiple factors but essentially that more of the same is not a viable solution.

Statistics from UNESCO reveal that the adult literacy rate reached 87% in 2016 but has since stagnated. A more recent report (UN, 2022) suggests that due to the pandemic and underinvestment it is probable that the number of illiterate adults will grow alarmingly in the coming years. Worldwide there are 763 million persons who do not know how to read and write. The large majority of these 763 million are poor, dispossessed and oppressed living in the global South: workers, women, residents in rural areas or in the periphery of large urban settlements, indigenous or original peoples, unemployed or informal workers. The term illiterate continues to be a pejorative term closely linked to ignorance. Our notion of literacy and illiterates remains firmly based on a deficit model of education. It defines men and women by what they lack and not by what they possess in terms of qualities, skills and abilities - of what they **do not** know and not of what **they do** know.

Practice has demonstrated that to treat illiteracy as a standalone variable – as a uniquely educational challenge - is untenable and unviable. Consistent evidence exists to show the strong correlations between literacy and expressions of inequality and other forms of vulnerability and poverty. Illiteracy as an expression of inequality and poverty needs to be treated as part of a complex articulation of social policies related to health, housing, basic sanitation, work and environment. Literacy as the foundation of education must walk hand in hand with the other SDGs and is instrumental in contributing to achieving the majority of the goals, particularly those related to poverty (SDG 1), food security (SDG 2), health and well-being (SDG 3), gender equality and women's empowerment (SDG 5), economic growth and work (SDG 8) and peace (SDG 16).

Perhaps the time has come to **reconsider** the removal of the adult illiteracy rate from the education component of the Human Development Index, which took place in 2010. As professor Nelly Stromquist warned at the time: "(...) the abandonment of literacy as an indicator will generate even greater disregard by governments for this important knowledge dimension". (ICAE, 2015).

The report of the Futures of Education Commission makes a strong case for a new social

contract for education, grounded in two principles: ensuring the right to quality education throughout life and strengthening education as a public endeavour and a common good. The Global Education Monitoring Report of 2016 (Education for People and Planet) sets out five pillars for sustainable development, 'People', 'Planet', 'Prosperity', 'Peace' and 'Partnership' whilst the Report on the **Transforming Education Summit 2022** (UN, 2023) suggested five further goals for learning. Together these principles, pillars and goals constitute elements which could form the basis for a new transformative narrative of education.

Paulo Freire constantly repeated his understanding that "Reading the **world** always precedes reading the **word**, and reading the **word** implies continually reading the **world**" (Freire; Macedo, 1987). The challenge of learning to read is intricately embedded in our search to understand the reality in which we live. The challenges with which literacy was faced in the 1960s when Freire developed his praxis are qualitatively different from the challenges we face today - climate change, pollution and the loss of biodiversity - but the need to read the **world** continues to be priority. After centuries in which the enlighteners declared the absolute domination of nature as the main task of man, and scientists and engineers literally declared war on nature, we are now faced with a new challenge. In James Lovelock's words "The earth is more than just a home; it's a living system and we are part of it" (2016).

Over the past 400 or 500 years, humanity has increasingly become disconnected from its natural habitat. Amitrav Ghosh (2022) argues that the dynamics of climate change are rooted in a centuries-old geopolitical order constructed by Western colonialism which resulted in "the muting of a large part of humanity" and in the "simultaneous muting of nature" with dire consequences for the way in which 'humanity' related and relates to the natural world. As Ghosh explains "Out of these processes of subduing and muting was born the idea of 'Nature' as an inert entity, a conception that would in time become a basic tenet of what might be called 'official modernity'". (Ghosh, 2022, pp.38-39). Bruno Latour similarly argues that Humans are not above nature. They are intrinsically part of it (2017). The Brazilian Indigenous leader and philosopher [Ailton Krenak](#), insists that "Everything is nature. The cosmos is nature. Everything that I can think of is nature" (2020, p.8).

How then do we reconnect to nature and what is literacy's role in that process? Firstly, we need to recognise that there are many ways, and not just one way, of knowing the world and that the predominant path we have chosen has led to a negation of an interdependent understanding of the planet as an integrated system. Amongst the alternative epistemological strategies, the concept of good living – 'buen vivir' in Spanish, provides a vital example. Secondly, this way of knowing the world has recently been integrated within the educational strategy in which Freire's approach to literacy was embedded, popular education.

It is only relatively recently that western science has recognised that Indigenous knowledges and other ancient place-based knowledge are something more than exotic practices to be studied by anthropologists.

'Good living' should not be reduced or confused with the western notion of well-being or even that of prosperity. As Hessel and Morin (2011, p.24) point out, the notion of well-being has dwindled in contemporary civilization to the strictly material sense that implies comfort, wealth and ownership. Implicit in 'good living' is a different way of reading the world and one which seeks to redefine the relationship not only between humans and nature but how human beings relate amongst themselves. Humans are not the 'lords and masters of nature' nor is nature an externality to human history (Dávalos, 2008, np). The way in which knowledge was and is produced takes as its premise this relationship between humanity and nature, which represent two parts of the same unity.

'Good living', with its cosmological roots in the original peoples of the continent, has exercised a growing influence over the practice of Popular Education. For Freire, popular education is an antidote to oppression, "directed at the transformation of society, taking as its starting point the concrete/lived experience (...)" (Paludo, 2015, p.178). It constitutes an education, which defines the well-being and collective happiness of its subjects as the goal of education. Education is not limited to transmitting but, above all, to producing knowledge as a constituent element of the practice of liberty. Whilst intending to emancipate, education takes dialogue as its starting point and pedagogical instrument. Equally, education and learning are understood as processes, which are an integral part of our whole life span – life-wide and life-deep. Hence the pertinence of the concept of lifelong learning and education. In Freire's words (2001, p. 52) "The world is not finished. It is always in the process of becoming".

Faced by the recognition that "We as human beings are making our very home inhabitable" Fernandez concludes that Popular Education's historical concern with transformation and social emancipation, can benefit greatly from incorporating ethical, aesthetic, political, pedagogical and epistemological dimensions of 'good living' (...)" (2016, p.31). Just as popular education understands that human beings are the subjects and protagonists of their own education, so in the concept of 'good living' the natural environment becomes a subject with rights and not an object to be exploited for human ends.

The elaboration of a new narrative for literacy as part of the educational process requires an understanding of the root causes of the crisis. Hence, the relevance of Freire's insistence that reading the **world** should precede reading the **word**. There exists a growing body of evidence to suggest that the divorce between humanity and nature plays a significant role in this process of climate change. Centuries of western domination has tended to impose a univocal epistemological understanding of the world and, thereby, 'muting' other forms of knowing the world. Thus, the urgency to elaborate a new narrative for literacy, which incorporates pluriversal readings of reality in which humans and nature are not opposing forces and in which the planet is recognised as the common home of all forms of life.

In this context, literacy will be concerned with a rereading of the human and more-than-human worlds, which will provide both the content and the grammar necessary for the new relationship. 'Good living' and Popular Education offer alternative paradigms on

which to build new narratives of education in which both humans and nature are co-protagonists. Paul Bélanger's alert at the end of CONFINTEA VI, in Belém, in 2009 that: "The planet will only survive if it becomes a learning planet" (UNESCO, 2010) is complemented by Latour's warning that despite the urgency of the challenge it is necessary to go very slowly: 'il faut aller très lentement, parce que le défi est très urgent'. (Wildermeersch, 2023)

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