

By : DATUK SERI SYED HAMID ALBAR
Venue : UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA
Date : 9 NOVEMBER 2001
Title : SOUTH EAST ASIAN LITERACY AND READING CONFERENCE

"LITERACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR SOUTH EAST ASIAN NATIONS"

Y.Bhg. Professor Datin Dr. Jamaliah Mohd. Ali

Y.Bhg. Profesor Dato' Dr. Abdul
Samad Hadi,
Timbalan Naib Canselor Akademik
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

H.e. Ambassador of the Philippines

Y.Bhg. Profesor Dr. Halimah Badioze Zaman
Presiden Persatuan Pembacaan Malaysia

Y.Berusaha Profesor Madya Dr Nooreiny Maarof
Pengerusi Persidangan 'South East Asian Literacy And Reading Conference'
(SEALRC 2001)

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamualaikum dan Selamat Pagi.

Terlebih dahulu saya ingin mengucapkan syukur ke hadrat Allah kerana dengan izinNya kita dapat sama-sama berkumpul di dewan Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia ini dalam satu majlis ilmu yang penting. Semoga perhimpunan kita pada hari ini dan berikutnya akan mendapat keberkatan dari Allah Subhanahuwataala.

At the outset allow me to welcome all, both the participants and guests, to the conference. To our foreign participants, in welcoming you to Malaysia, I do hope you will also find time to visit some places of interest in particular in and around Kuala Lumpur. I understand that some of the shopping complexes in Kuala Lumpur are now offering very attractive sales! Please visit our shopping complexes for a good bargain.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and privilege for me indeed to be asked by the Malaysian Reading Association, to say a few words at this august gathering on a very important and pertinent subject - literacy and its implications on today's world in general and South

East Asia in particular and subsequently to declare open the South East Asian Literacy and Reading Conference 2001 (SEALRC 2001).

I am glad to learn at this conference that you are able to bring together experts and academicians in the field of reading and literacy as well as other interested individuals together. I am certain during the next two days you will leave a very productive and constructive discourse on the subject. Whilst sharing and discussing problems, experiences, perspectives and study results in your respective countries. This undoubtedly will further strengthen the collaborative efforts and cooperation in the field of reading and literacy.

Your theme "Literacy in the 21st Century: Challenges and Strategies for South East Asian Countries" is indeed very apt. All of us are very familiar with the words literacy and in Islam the first five verses that were conveyed to Prophet Muhammad s.a.w were to recite and read in the name of God that created us as human beings. This is because through reading and understanding that we will be able to seek knowledge and understand the message of God. Islam encourages and propagates its Ummah to be literate and to always seek knowledge. In today's world, as it has been in the past, the level of development of a particular society or nation is measured or closely linked to the level of literacy of its population. Indeed civilization is built upon them. In ancient times we read about the wealthy ruling families become patron of Arts and Culture.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The definitions and conceptions of literacy today have changed and in fact it is being redefined constantly as the world is changing. It truly is an evolving concept. Harman in his book "Illiteracy: A National Dilemma" has likened literacy to "walking to the horizon that steadily recedes". An accepted view of literacy, however, as it pertains to the 21st century includes the ability to function effectively in a given environment and society. The environment and society today is marked by a new system, i.e. an international system that shapes domestic and international politics, economics and social lives. In short, this new international system is known as globalization in today's context. It is a dynamic and an on-going process which integrates markets, nations-states and sophisticated technologies that allow individuals, corporations and nation-states "to reach the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper". The question that arises now is - are we fully equipped to remain as players of this new system? It is in this context that literacy of a different kind is required. We need to develop what is termed as global literacy in order to remain relevant and play a positive and active role.

One then may ask, what is global literacy? A globally literate person is able to "see, think, act and mobilize in a culturally mindful ways". He or she is able to see "the challenges and opportunities in the world, think with an international mindset, act with fresh, global-centric leadership behaviors and mobilize people across national cultures". Thus a globally literate person should possess qualities of personal, social, business and cultural literacies. Each of these literacies is interdependent and is manifested differently around the world. It eventually develops into a competency

reflecting the uniqueness of particular countries based on national character and culture.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a challenge to all of us. We need to begin with the basics. We can begin with traditional conceptions of literacy and strive to develop each citizen's potential by providing him or her with the opportunity to access knowledge. Obviously there is a need to develop literacy in English as it has become a global lingua franca and the language of knowledge and of ICT, such as the Internet. This is of course in addition to literacy in our national language. This ability requires basic literacy skills of reading and writing. At the same time, other forms of literacy need to be developed and fostered such as critical, family, functional, information and computer literacies, to name a few. Information and computer literacy, in particular, is demanded for survival and life-long learning in the present global or k-economy.

A concerted effort by individuals, communities, public and private organizations and governments is required to develop multi-literacies. In this regard, I recognize and congratulate the Malaysian Reading Association, an affiliate member of the International Reading Association, for its initiative in organizing this conference and for their various programs and activities to promote reading and literacy in Malaysia. This is indeed a noble effort.

A lot has been learned about literacy in the last 50 years since the United Nations declared it to be a basic human right along with the right to adequate food, health care, and housing. Although one might think that food, health care, and housing are more pressing needs than literacy education, literacy is now seen as a major tool to help address these other needs. We are finding that in addition to being important sustenance for the mind, literacy satisfies other needs in some very specific ways.

It is an accepted fact that literacy is a major problem in today's world. In some cases, literacy is near the top of the policy agenda of most countries in the world, including both industrialized and developing countries. According to UNESCO statistics, as we ushered into the new millennium, there still remain almost a billion illiterates all over the world. The number is almost the equivalent of the population of India. The prognosis for a major reduction in many countries is, however, not very optimistic.

A wide variety of projects have been set up around the world to promote literacy in very unique and interesting ways. Unfortunately, one of the consistent challenges these projects face is learner motivation. Learners often have trouble seeing how literacy will enhance their lives or how much effort it will take to become literate. Learners do not see literacy's significance.

Low literacy levels are endemic across the globe. The relative costs and benefits of literacy programs are still poorly understood. Innovative approaches to literacy improvement should be encouraged to create a better understanding of the nature of literacy and literacy education programs. Literacy is of central importance to development. Increasingly, it is interrelated with higher income and job productivity. The social consequences of low levels of literacy in some cultures can include higher prison incarceration rates, welfare dependency, and social disintegration.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The household word today is globalization and liberalization. As countries seek to position themselves favorably in the new global economy, policymakers have realized the importance of seriously developing their country's human capital. In order to be able to compete in today's world marketplace, it is essential for countries to raise the basic education and literacy levels of all people. Providing access to education for the rural poor and women, groups that have traditionally been underserved can no longer be ignored. Training in basic skills is a prime tool in development work as it improves basic education and literacy levels while at the same time addressing many local health and economic needs.

In recent years, many educators and scholars have experienced a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the use of the term "illiteracy" and of the phrase "eradication of illiteracy" as defining terms for the field.

Maybe, it is time to take a critical look at the concept and connotations of the term "illiteracy". Maybe, it is time that we move away from framing policies and practices only on eradicating illiteracy; and instead orient ourselves toward the problem of literacy. We should devote more attention to the task of developing high quality literacy work and not be content to count successes in reducing "quantities" of illiterates, since this approach oversimplifies the nature and causes of low literacy worldwide. The terminological change from illiteracy to literacy would signal a conceptual shift, one that opens up a wider range of new approaches to literacy work.

Because of the rapidly changing technological advances, not only is basic literacy a fundamental human right, it is also fast becoming a necessity for participation in a changing world. Many adults and children around the world do not receive basic literacy schooling. Until they do so, they will be excluded from many facets of the global economy. With the ability to read and write, people can increase their access to information concerning political, health, and other issues. Basic literacy can indeed help improve lives worldwide.

Few countries are oblivious to the perception that a literate and skilled populace can have an important impact on the social and economic life of nations. Numerous claims have been put forward that a given minimum rate of literacy is a prerequisite for economic growth in developing countries.

Even if literacy has only limited direct economic consequences, it may have social consequences that become important objectives for development planners. In developing countries, the gender disparity is quite marked, while literacy variation in industrialized countries, tends to be more visible by ethnic or minority group status. In such cases, the social consequences of low literacy in industrialized countries can include lowered rates of incarceration in prisons, welfare dependency, and social disintegration, while in developing countries, there is a wide variety of demonstrated empirical relationships between literacy and lower fertility, lower infant mortality, higher nutrition, and so on.

The political appeal of literacy as a policy goal is also apparent in today's resurgence of literacy work in North America and Europe as well as in parts of Asia and Africa. This type of political appeal stems from government's need to show that they are doing something good for the most disenfranchised communities of the country, while often justifying the investment in terms of lower social welfare costs, as well as greater economic productivity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a fact that literacy is progressing well in isolated places around the world. Yet the enormous number of adult illiterates that still exists is something we have to look at seriously. As long as efforts at eradicating adult illiteracy are conducted sporadically with meager resources and less than half-hearted support from national authorities and the international community, this number is not likely to decrease. Sadly, this has been the case for the last few decades.

The reluctance of some to discuss this subject indicates that they are ill at ease with it. Maybe it is far more exciting to discuss communication technology. Illiteracy is nothing but an old fashioned, ugly problem. It only reminds one of that distasteful subject, social injustice. And then there are those who would never change the status quo, who would never support literacy for fear of putting their own position at risk.

Let us all ask ourselves: how can the world community, so willing to invest millions and billions in modern progress, tolerate the fact that there so many still deprived of that most basic human right? The opportunity to be literate.

Ten years after the "World Conference on Education for All" in Jomtien, Thailand, nations are beginning to come to terms with the need to create a literate society. Too much is at stake for them not to. There must be continuous efforts to rally public support for literacy and to make the plight of the illiterate and their children known. We have to unveil the mystery surrounding it, to share the experience, raise the issues, discuss the trends and face the challenges.

The holding of this conference is, therefore, very timely. This is one such effort of how individuals and organizations can help make a difference in fostering and developing literacy in our region. I hope that everyone could contribute to the literacy development of our nations by participating more actively in future efforts. I wish you all the best of luck and a productive and fruitful conference. To the international participants, I wish you all a pleasant and enjoyable stay in Malaysia.....and do spend some money here too!

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is with profound happiness that I declare open the South East Asian Literacy and Reading Conference.

Thank you.