



RESEARCH FOR READING

Global movement Project Literacy works to change the way educators reach the world's most marginalised. But can research and innovation bring about change on the vast scale needed? Flashes examines some of the projects being built to scale today...

When someone says 'illiterate', what do you think of? Most likely, you imagine someone not being able to pick up and read any book they fancy, and then you ponder little further. But delve deeper into the issue and it becomes clear that an ability to read opens up far more than a love of literature – and an inability to do so comes with far greater disadvantages than being unable to lose yourself in the latest bestseller.

In fact, illiteracy is often connected with other issues of exclusion from society. People who can't read or write are far more likely to live in poverty, wherever in the world they hail from. They are more likely to be unable to access education or to drop out of school early, to have difficulty finding employment and to miss out

on opportunities to participate fully in society and the workforce.

And while the implications are wide reaching, the scale of the problem is often underestimated. Around 750 million people across the world are classified as illiterate – that's around 10% of the global population, and more than the population of Europe. Of those, 123 million are aged between 15 and 24 years old, while two thirds are women.

While the problem is very much a global one, ideas that it impacts most heavily in developing nations are wide of the mark – of the US\$1.19 trillion cost of illiteracy globally each year, it is developed nations that see the biggest chunk of their GDP lost to the issue. Around ➤



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32 million adults in the USA are illiterate, and in the UK, the National Literacy Trust, a member agency of Project Literacy, last year found that one in eight disadvantaged children in Britain said they didn't own a book.

"Lacking vital literacy skills holds a person back at every stage of their life," the agency reveals. "As a child they won't be able to succeed at school, as a young adult they will be locked out of the job market, and as a parent they won't be able to support their own child's learning. This intergenerational cycle makes social mobility and a fairer society more difficult.

"People with low literacy skills may not be able to read a book or newspaper, understand road signs or price labels, make sense of a bus or train timetable, fill out a form, read instructions on medicines or use the internet."

And this is where Project Literacy comes into play. A global campaign founded and convened by educational publisher Pearson, it "aims to end illiteracy by 2030 through building partnerships and driving action", with its latest impact report suggesting the body has now reached three billion people worldwide through its online, print and broadcast channels, with more than seven million people having benefited from its programmes.

Heading into the second quarter of 2019, more than 120 third sector, business and industry bodies across the globe are now involved as members of the project's partner network, with further members expected throughout the year, while a host of projects aimed at testing new approaches to tackling illiteracy are currently being created to scale. ↗

REACHING

PROJECT LITERACY LAB

The world's first international partnership focused on supporting rapid growth ventures that want to help close the global literacy gap, Project Literacy Lab is the body's flagship project. Created around the idea that entrepreneurs are uniquely positioned to help develop new models and technologies for educational outreach, the initiative aims to wrap unrivalled resources around ventures worldwide that are targeting key challenges tied to literacy. Its accelerator events provide these businesses with mentorship, finance and networking opportunities to help them scale their innovations more rapidly.



MINDS

The Project Literacy initiatives aimed at closing the education gap



ILLITERACITY

Among a number of initiatives aimed at engaging more people globally with the plight of the illiterate, IlliteracyCity is a multimedia online project allowing visitors to explore a virtual city populated by the world's illiterate. Here, problems including poverty, lack of civil rights, unemployment, incarceration, inequality and lack of access to basic healthcare are explored through the lens of the impact of educational disadvantage.

EVOKE: LEADERS FOR LITERACY

A partnership between the Project Literacy campaign, the World Bank and the coalition All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development, this game-based learning platform aims to improve child literacy by encouraging social innovation among young people.

A first pilot, delivered in 2017 in Limpopo, the province with the lowest literacy rate in South Africa, saw more than 80 young people aged between 14 and 32 take part in a three-month programme using a multi-player game to help them identify and solve challenges related to illiteracy in their home environment. The results were promising, with those involved showing a greatly improved knowledge base of literacy and of how they could create projects designed at reducing its impact on their local communities. A second pilot is now under way in Tembisa, in a bid to gather further feedback on the platform, before it is rolled out across South Africa and beyond.



READ TO KIDS

A collaborative project between Pearson and Worldreader, the Read to Kids pilot in India looked at ways to harness simple mobile technology to empower parents in low-resource communities to read to their kids. Using mobile phones to encourage shared reading time in the family home, the initiative worked with more than 203,000 households in 177 low-income communities across Delhi, providing them with access to 550 age-appropriate book titles for free on any data-connected device. The project has since expanded to Jordan, and Worldreader plans to move into Africa by 2020, taking the scheme's total reach beyond the one million household mark.