The Bangladesh Times

Adult illiteracy in Britain ?

ON 12 March last year the BBC Six O'Clock News reported that "one in eight adults is illiterate" in UK. The statement was based on the preliminary findings of a Lancaster University study, for which a final report was published later.

Again, there were alarming media headlines: six million adults, it was said, could not read, write or add properly. Several leader writers greeted the results as a vindication of the education reforms earlier proposed by the Government A school system that turned out illiterates after 11 years of compulsory education surely needed a shake-up, they argued.

And so it would, if it did any such thing But illiteracy among contemporary school-leavers is a myth. Any dispassionate examination of the evidence shows that, whatever else the schools have failed to do, they have come as near to achieving universal literacy as they are ever likely to.

Much depends on what is meant by literacy. In 1956, an HMI survey of 11-year-olds' reading capabilities concluded that 23 pupils (1 per cent of the sample) were illiterate or semi-literate. All were interviewed by the inspectors. Only two, they found, were unable to read "in the same sense in which the ordinary Englishman would be unable to read a word of Arabic".

To many people, illiteracy means just that. To the Victorians, it meant the inability to write your own name. By such standards, illiteracy has indeed disappeared. Now we set ourselves higher standards—and these depend on how we want to use our reading and writing skills. The specialists talk of "functional literacy". Most people are functionally illiterate in some circumstances — when confronted by a surveyor's report or instructions for filling in a tax form, for example.

The Lancaster University study was based on interviews in 1981 with 12,534 people aged 23. In three separate questions, interviewees were asked: "Since leaving school have you had problems with reading, writing spelling, or number work|basic maths," The 13 per cent who gave a simple "yes" to any of these questions were categorised as having "difficulties".

Of these, 28.5 per cent (or 3.7 per cent of the whole sample) said they had problems with reading. Most of these also had problems with writing spelling. An additional 45.5 per cent (or 5.9 per cent of the sample) had problems with writing|spelling, but not reading.

There is no means of telling how many of the latter group were simply bad spellers. But two in three of those with "difficulties" gave no details when asked how these affected their daily lives. Those who did give examples are revealing. "I have always fancied writing a book, a novel, but I have not sufficient command of the English diction to be able to do this." "I'd have liked to take up veterinary work if I had the brains for it." "I would like to work in shops or an office doing nice things—the sort of things they do on the telly."

These responses help to explain why 9 per cent of those reporting difficulties had qualifications at least of A-level standard. A summary of the findings states: "A large number of those reporting problems did have some competence in literacy and numeracy skills... It is, therefore, both inaccurate and pejorative to refer to adults with basic skills difficulties as 'illiterate.'

The same applies to the thousands of adults who have benefited from adult literacy schemes. At a conference earlier this month, Dr. Tom Gorman, head of the language department at the National Foundation for Educational Research, quoted the results of tests carried out in the mid-1970s on a sample of the 50,000 adults receiving literacy tuition under the schemes. Nearly a third were found to be effective readers for most purposes while only 10 per cent were complete non-readers. Forty per cent had at least a minimal mastery of basic writing skills; only 15 per cent provided no evidence of being able to write.

According to their tutors, 93 per cent (of people on an adult literacy scheme, remember) could meet the Victorian criterion for literacy and write their own names. Half could write a straightforward letter to a friend or relative; nearly a quarter could write an intelligible letter complaining about defective goods.

Dr. Gorman quotes further evidence that, even at 11, illiteracy has been virtually eradicated. Those leaving primary schools "unable to decipher or decode familiar words in print do not exceed 1 per cent of the population." Nine out of 10 can use a contents page to locate information and identify the main point of a short passage. Even in the first year of primary school, 90 per cent can read a simple menu and order a five-course meal in writing.

Again, 96 per cent of 11-year olds have attained sufficient control over spelling, capital letters and punctuation to make their writing intelligible on first reading.

None of this, as Dr. Gorman is the first to admit, necessarily proves that children leave school with adequate skills. Many pupils have mastered the rudiments of reading but, if there is any subtlety, do not really understand the writer's meaning. For example, half of a sample of 15-year-olds after reading the start of Brave New World, concluded that Huxley favoured biological mass-production.

But illiteracy, as popularly understood, hardly exists; the six million adult illiterates are a phantom army, created by zealous lobbyists and point-scoring politicians. Even the thousands who quite reasonably want to improve their literacy skills are inclined to blame themselves for their shortcomings, not their schools.

Dr. Gorman says that inquiries into pupils' attitudes to writing show that they give high priority to spelling and punctuation. "It is simply not the case that most teachers pay little attention to these matters. Many pay attention to little else."

PETER WILBY