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Education

The Dropout Problem

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The rate at which adult population is gaining literacy is outstripped by the rate of population growth. Primary school dropouts add to the number of illiterates.

HONG KONG—As in much of the Third World, increasing numbers of adults in industrialised countries also labour under "severe handicaps in reading and writing".

Surveys by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) indicate that in some of these economically advanced countries the number of people hardly able to read and write has reached 5 per cent or more of the population. A far larger proportion of the population suffer from less serious literacy-related difficulties.

Because of these handicaps, the functionally illiterate find it increasingly difficult to hand jobs in a modern economy. Those holding low-paying, menial jobs see little or no prospect at all for promotion in pay and work status and thus remain underemployed. Too often, they retire early in their own limited world, unable "to participate effectively in increasingly complex societies", notes UNESCO.

A phenomenon in industrialised societies, functional illiteracy has been traced to alarmingly high dropout rates. With only a few years of formal schooling, many have been lured out of school by the prospect of making easy money in sweatshops and factories. Poverty is also a major reason, and peer group is a contri-

buted factor.

The dropout problem becomes twice compounded in developing countries, observes UNESCO. In Sri Lanka, for example, almost 30 per cent leave school before completing their primary cycle.

With a relatively high literacy rate, the Philippines also has a largely unremedied dropout problem. A study by the Fund for Assistance to Private Education places school dropouts at 9.6 million or nearly 20 per cent of the national population. Only 62 out of every 100 first graders finish the elementary course or reach the fifth grade, according to the study.

The situation is no better in other developing Asia-Pacific countries. And concerned officials have come up with non-formal education programmes to rescue school dropouts who have lapsed back into illiteracy.

In Sri Lanka, the Education Ministry conducts literacy classes in state schools and in other suitable locations. A parallel programme is the setting up of Learning Activity Centres in remote and sparsely populated areas to provide alternative basic education to children.

In the Philippines, the livelihood-oriented University of Life is being eyed as the nucleus of activities for developing non-formal education programmes nationwide.

China has spare-time primary schools for peasants who have attained literacy, dropouts from primary schools, youth, and middle-aged individuals.

Indonesia boasts a comprehensive programme of literacy for primary school dropouts and those who have never had any formal schooling.

Vietnam has full-time, and part-time complementary education for

various levels of learners and evening classes for the illiterates.

UNESCO itself has launched innovative programmes to stem the tide of illiteracy in Asia and the Pacific. Only a year old, its Asia-Pacific Programme of Education for All or APPEAL is now generating tremendous enthusiasm among member states. Also in place is its Asian Programme of Educational Innovation for Development, or APEID.

But for all these programmes for continuing education, the illiteracy problem remains daunting.

The dropout problem is just one gray area in the global literacy picture. Worldwide, the number of illiterates has increased despite an improvement in the aggregate literacy rate of developing countries over the last 15 years.

APPEAL is a case in point.

The idea is to prod countries with illiteracy or functional illiteracy problems to eliminate these handicaps by providing education for all.

Part of the thrust in the coming decade is to increase opportunities for women's education. As Dr. Nam-tik Aksornkool, UNESCO programme specialist in literacy training in Asia, put it, "Educate a girl and you educate a nation".—Dept. News

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