



"...This is an intolerable situation. Illiteracy is not a fact of life, but a consequence of inaction on the part of governments and societies. Its consequences are pervasive and powerful. If we wish to combat poverty, injustice and the violence that so often results from them, we must begin by mobilizing minds through education and literacy."

Former UNESCO Director-General Federico Mayor

Adult Literacy

More than 20 percent of American adults – one out of every five – read at or below the fifth-grade level which is far below the level needed to earn a living wage. They cannot read to their children, fill out a job application, or pass a written driver's test.

Forty-three percent of people with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty; 17% receive food stamps, and 70% have no job or work only part-time. Workers who lack a high school diploma earn a mean monthly income of \$452, compared to \$1,829 for those with a bachelor's degree. Welfare recipients with low literacy skills stay on welfare the longest.

American businesses are estimated to lose over \$60 billion in productivity each year due workers' deficiencies in fundamental reading, writing, and math skills. The number of companies reporting skilled worker shortages more than doubled between 1995 and 1998, from 27% to over 47%.

In California, 24% of adults perform at the lowest level of literacy – this amounts to more than 5 million adults who cannot function effectively as citizens, workers, and family members. In San Francisco, 30% of the adults scored in the lowest level of the National Literacy Survey.

As the education level of adults improves, so does their children's success in school. Children of adults who participate in literacy programs improve their grades and test scores, improve their reading skills, and are less likely to drop out of school.

Adolescent Literacy

Adolescent literacy is an urgent national challenge, according to the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), and the U.S. Department of Education. Every child's future depends in large part on her or his capacity to elicit and convey meaning in text, as dire statistics underline:

- at least 50% of the unemployed are functionally illiterate. (Department of Labor)
- 13% of all 17-year-olds, and 44% of minority youth, are functionally illiterate
- 60% of American prison inmates are illiterate; 85% of juvenile offenders have problems reading
- on average, a functionally illiterate adult earns 42% less than a high school graduate (Department of Education)
- children who do not read by third grade often fail to catch up and are more likely to drop out of school, take drugs, or go to prison.

The biggest crisis is one of comprehension. The language of books is not the language of everyday conversation. Compared to Latin-based languages such as Italian, English has many more synonyms because of its multiple roots in Latin, German, and Anglo-Saxon. Huge numbers of adults are stuck between Grades 4 and 8 because they can “read” words in the sense of decoding letters to produce sounds, but they cannot “read” in the sense of understanding the meaning of most words in the English language’s extensive working vocabulary.

Americans watch an extraordinary amount of television: over 5,000 hours before starting kindergarten, on average—more time than it takes to achieve a bachelor’s degree. But we are not a nation of readers (10% of people do 70% of the reading). To induce in youth the habit and joy of reading is the turnkey step in transforming their life potential, as individuals and as a generation.

Recognizing this situation, AFL’s approach is to support educators by providing art that motivates young people to read. To kids, “reading is scary, but music’s not.” So we use the grooviness of music and technology to engage youth in the magic of storytelling: their own stories and those in books—books that come to feel less intimidating and more accessible. From that point on—once the books are open—the research and statistics begin to look more encouraging:

“Being more enthusiastic about reading and a frequent reader was more of an advantage, on its own, than having well-educated parents in good job.”

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) research

A love of reading is more important for children’s academic success than their family’s wealth and class. The OECD study discovered that children from deprived backgrounds performed better in tests than those from more affluent homes if they enjoyed reading books, newspapers, and comics in their spare time. Books provide the means to turn the situation around:

- The top 2% of students in the country read for 65 minutes a day.
- The top 10% of students read for 20 minutes a day.
- The bottom 10% read for 1/10th of a minute per day.

AFL is guided by the National Institute for Literacy definition of literacy: “an individual’s ability to read, write, speak in English, compute, and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual, and in society.” AFL works to raise the literacy level of all adolescents and young adults, to build their capacity to **make meaning** from text through reading and writing, whether they lack basic literacy skills; can sound out words but not interpret or engage with text; or can read and write but don’t. All these levels of reader benefit from experiences that engage and deepen their curiosity and critical thinking skills, essential components of effective literacy.