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Literacy for All: A key to a more equitable education

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Ladies and Gentlemen

You may already know that the report of the High Level Group of Experts on Literacy of the European Union aims to

- ✓ Point out the importance of appropriate literacy for Europe and its citizens today,
- ✓ describe the problem in the specific dimensions and the types it has acquired in the 21st century,
- ✓ draw attention to successful educational policies that have been implemented in Europe, stressing the factors that led to success, and assessing the prospects and ways of their generalization,
- ✓ provide a dynamic framework for the design of effective educational policies in all European Union countries.

Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou, who had the idea and established the High Level Group, wrote in her foreword: “I am confident that this report and its concrete proposals and recommendations will help European Union Member States make their own policies more coherent, efficient and successful”.

In a similar way Laurentien, Princes of the Netherlands, who effectively chaired the group, states: “This report will, I hope, help kick-start an ambitious, comprehensive and structural approach within and across European Union Member States to prevent and reduce literacy problems.”

I.

I fully agree with both of them and I am certain that they will be able to convince and motivate every needed partner in order to make this important project run successfully.

I am really thankful to the Cyprus government for including the issue of **literacy for all** in its presidency’s program, and I am especially happy knowing that Commissioner Androula Vassiliou will keep it at the top of the European educational agenda.

For the opening of today’s ambitious discussion, I am here mainly to explain the rationale of the report, and less to repeat its very compressed content, since everyone can and will read it.

Let me begin with some remarks on

- ✓ why literacy is something different today than it was in the past, and
- ✓ why promoting **literacy for all** in Europe today is a crucial and urgent educational, social, economic and political issue.

The discourse about literacy in Europe has always been one about the foundations of culture, civilization, economic development and welfare and their relationship to literacy.

I remind you that literacy in Europe is closely intertwined with great thinkers and great movements who formed our modern European identity and then influenced the entire world.

It was Johann Amos Comenius who declared that the wealth and welfare of a nation depends on its people's literacy and he stressed that all people must be literate and all people, regardless of social background, are able to be literate – even the so called obtuse persons and -this was the greatest provocation at that time! - also women are able to be literate.

Literacy in Europe is also closely intertwined with the great project of enlightenment, which is, according to Immanuel Kant,

“man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another.”

In this framework, alphabetization, meaning learning to read and write properly, was an elementary and almost sufficient tool for achieving an understanding without guidance from another.

To be literate in the same framework was conceptualized as the ability to decode and encode, read and write, and for some few people even to produce a varied set of texts belonging to different genres which are appropriate to a range of communicative situations.

This was the situation until some decades ago.

But, in our times traditional alphabetization, although still necessary, is not sufficient if someone wants to understand our highly complicated world without guidance from another.

And it is not sufficient especially if s/he needs to manage and change adverse living conditions.

According to the great Paulo Freire, literacy is “*reading the word and the world*”.

This is why we differentiate now between “alphabetization” and “literacy”.

To become literate today, someone must acquire a set of composite skills and abilities that enable them

- ✓ to get and decode information of very different modes from various sources, and
- ✓ combine them properly in order to get their meaning, and come in a position to negotiate critically their cultural, social, political and ideological aspects.

For this reason, the High Level Group recommends in its report critical literacy approaches.

A critical reader and writer must be able

- ✓ to recognize the different functions of language in its social and cultural contexts;
- ✓ s/he must be able to read what’s behind the words and between the lines, as part of the learners’ social empowerment.

Based on these considerations we define three levels of literacy:

Baseline literacy

Having the knowledge of letters, words and text structures that is needed to read and write at a level that enables self-confidence and motivation for further development. It is broadly equivalent to PISA level 1.

Functional literacy

It is the ability to read and write at a level that enables someone to develop and function in society, at home, at school and at work. It is broadly equivalent to PISA level 2.

Multiple literacy

It is the ability to use reading and writing skills in order to produce, understand, interpret and critically evaluate written information. It is a basis for digital participation and making informed choices pertaining to finances, health, etc.

It is broadly equivalent to PISA level 3 and above, the threshold identified by OECD enabling people to meet lifelong literacy requirements.

In the same way we define baseline, functional and **multiple numeracy**.

Multiple literacy and multiple numeracy for all European citizens, combined with digital competence and communicative abilities –this is our ambitious aim. (Digital competence is the ability to use ICT to retrieve, assess, produce, present and exchange information, and the ability to communicate and participate in collaborative networks via the Internet).

Yesterday alongside expansion, high quality of education was set as a goal.

What quality is, has to be defined. This is exactly what we are doing by setting multiple literacy as a goal for all.

And I can say that this is the foundation for quality in all subjects and preventing early school leaving.

To sum up:

- ✓ Promoting literacy today means reinvent the great project of liberating humans from ignorance and immaturity, which gave modern Europe its identity.
- ✓ Economic challenges, social problems (such as poverty and racism), and political distortions (such as the emergence of extreme right wing parties and movements) can be faced only by active citizens.

Core feature of a citizen, the prerequisite for being a citizen is multiple literacy. Otherwise people become victims of manipulation, they lose their autonomy and human dignity, or, speaking again with Immanuel Kant's words, it will be "*so easy for others to establish themselves as their guardians*".

This is the first reason why we call literacy a really big deal.

II.

Let me now add some facts people seem to be more interested in, especially today: the importance of **literacy for all** for economic development.

Several years ago McKinsey designed some educational scenarios for the USA and estimated the impact of literacy in many important sectors of society and personal life, such as the level of GDP, health costs, civic engagement, cultural richness, and others.

There was a positive impact in all sectors.

In the survey, the impact of literacy on the national economy is at the top, highlighted with impressive, well-understandable statements, like the following:

If the United States had closed the international achievement gap between 1983 and 1998 and raised its performance to the level of such nations as Finland and Korea, US GDP in 2008 would have been between \$1.3 trillion and \$2.3 trillion higher, representing 9 to 16 percent of GDP.

In a similar way the importance of **educational equity** for the national economy is presented in the same report:

If the United States had closed the racial achievement gap, and black and Latino student performance had caught up with that of white students by 1998, GDP in 2008 would have been between \$310 billion and \$525 billion higher, or roughly 2 to 4 percent of GDP.

Similar calculations have been developed about the impact of inclusive education, always showing that good **literacy for all** has immense positive impact for the economy and for the individuals themselves.

Recent research shows that what holds true for the USA does equally so for Europe, as it has been laid out in relevant documents of the Commission of the European Union.

I must stress that references to “achievement gap” in relevant reports refer to “achievement gap in literacy” – in some cases it happens explicitly and in others this notion is implied, since literacy is a kind of prerequisite for the achievement in all other subjects.

A positive correlation between achievement in reading and achievement in other subjects has been proved in several studies.

At this point, allow me a short comment on the statements made yesterday based on the economists’ prevalent opinion that educational systems are a “black box”.

I understand the circumstances leading them to this opinion but I can’t fully agree with them.

Looking on contents of curricula and the accompanied appropriate instructions can show that there are qualitative issues which explain why educational systems, that on the surface appear similar, have a different impact on the economy.

Multiple literacy is one of these factors, foremost because it contributes to the development of those key-competences, which are needed in the so called “knowledge society” and especially “knowledge economy”.

For this reason I was happy to hear commissioner Vassiliou saying yesterday, that there will be a project bringing together persons from different disciplines in order to bring light into the “box” which is perceived by many to be “black”.

III.

The question arises:

Since we really know how big a deal literacy is,

- ✓ why are there still so many illiterate persons in Europe, and
- ✓ why are there such big differences between countries?

There are many reasons, the most important of them listed in the High Level Group’s report.

I’d like to point to just three of them in order to show the multidimensionality of the task we have in front of us.

First

The High Level Group’s work was in some aspect easy.

Easy, because there is plenty of research, that provides us with all facts we need in order to describe, understand and interpret the multifaceted problem and there is plenty of good practices that show us the road we have to go in order to face the problem.

There are only a few questions, like literacy in plurilingual situations or more appropriate learning and instructional models for aged learners, that have to be researched and properly answered.

At the same time it was a difficult task, because there exist many misconceptions (listed in the report) and myths in this field which seem to be unquestionable for many people, even educated ones and even professionals in this field. These myths belong to a repertoire of self-evidences, which resist any change and sometimes seem to be immortal.

In this framework the argument can be made that literacy learning and assessment in some countries is not informed by trends in current linguistic theory.

The results of ADORE-Project, funded by the European Union, underline the problem and its consequences:

- ✓ *“Many Anglo-American and Nordic countries have been conscious of the problem of reading literacy for two or three decades now, which is reflected in the level of international reading research.*
- ✓ *In contrast, most of the other European countries have only developed this consciousness as a result of the PISA-Surveys;*
- ✓ *in some countries it still does not even exist.”*

For this reason,

“The probability of a child developing into a “struggling reader” varies in the different European countries. According to PISA 2006, only 4.8 % of 15-year-olds in one country, but 53.5 % of another country’s youth were low performers in reading.

How much a child struggles with reading, how long and with what consequences, depends largely on their country of origin and its educational system”.

This example indicates that the question of inequality and equity not only refers on the situation inside a country, it also refers to the situation between the Member States, making it an “interior problem of the European Union”.

Obviously, we have to change this fact, if we want to build up a coherent European Union, but there is still a lot of resistance, based mainly on ignorance and/or old-fashioned educational ideologies.

Second

There are at least 27 Million children at risk of poverty in the European Union. 1 in 10 children live in households where no one has a job. Without social benefits, at-risk-of-poverty levels for children would be 40%.

Keeping this in mind, we realize that every attempt to face problems of illiteracy should include appropriate measures to guarantee the material well-being and the dignity of children living in poverty.

But what we experience in our days is that the most radical cuts happen in countries with the lowest levels in literacy. This is very dangerous and it has to be addressed.

President Barroso stressed in his “State of the Union 2012 Address” last month following:

“Our agenda of structural reform requires a major adjustment effort. It will only work if it is fair and equitable. Because inequality is not sustainable.

In some parts of Europe we are seeing a real social emergency.

Rising poverty and massive levels of unemployment, especially among our young people.

That is why we must strengthen social cohesion. It is a feature that distinguishes European society from alternative models.

Some say that, because of the crisis, the European Social model is dead. I do not agree.

Yes, we need to reform our economies and modernize our social protection systems. But an effective social protection system that helps those in need is not an obstacle to prosperity. It is indeed an indispensable element of it. Indeed, it is precisely those European countries with the most effective social protection systems and with the most developed social partnerships, that are among the most successful and competitive economies in the world.”

I can add to President Barroso’s statement: A map showing the levels of literacy would be almost identical with any map showing countries’ economic success or the effectiveness of their social protection systems.

Third

In most European countries we have failed to address properly the phenomenon of bilingualism of migrants and migrant children in its relationship to literacy learning.

For many years multilingualism was declared a treasure in official documents of the European Union but it was considered and faced as an obstacle for achievement in literacy in our educational systems.

The question is now: How are we going to manage the more difficult problem of literacy learning under conditions of plurilingualism?

Plurilingualism – the use of more than two languages in everyday life of a person- will be a “normal” phenomenon since it accompanies not only inward migration (from countries outside the European Union) but increasingly also internal mobility (“migration” from one European Union Member State to another), which is a desirable and intended process on the road to European economic integration and sustainable development.

Yesterday, the German delegate mentioned the educational challenges that will arise in some years because of the coming demographic changes.

The challenge of plurilingualism will be heightened by these changes. But it is already here and we haven’t even started addressing it in the context of literacy.

Research in this area is poor and good educational practices are almost absent.

IV.

I highlighted just these three of numerous existing issues to show that literacy is really a big deal –big as a promise and big as a task, if we decide to plan and act properly in order to be successful.

A big deal, a big task, a big plan, a big action!

It is a project of such dimension that it can’t be managed by only one institution.

It needs the cooperation and contribution of many: Educational systems, families, unions of teachers, associations of the social partners, civic society, churches, and many other institutions and groups of society.

The High Level Group’s report describes the role every one of these institutions should play and indicates ways they can do it.

But, most of all, this project requires many responsible individuals in their role as parents, teachers, employers, trade-unionists, ordinary but conscious and engaged citizens.

For this

- ✓ we have to encourage them;
- ✓ we have to empower them;
- ✓ we have to promote and to support their engagement and their activities.

Literacy, as an educational problem, obviously belongs to the competences of the Member States. They are required to develop their own national strategy for promoting and improving literacy, including changing curricula (if needed) and providing appropriate training for their teachers of all subjects and at all levels.

But who doubts today that this issue surely also belongs to the duties of the European Commission, since literacy's relevance for the economic development, the social coherence and even the political integration of the Union is so obvious?

Considering this is true, it is obvious that we need close cooperation between European Commission and member-states in some key-areas, such as establishing:

- ✓ initiatives to encourage and empower civic society to engage in projects promoting literacy
- ✓ specific programs for motivating and enabling universities and teacher training institutions to educate teachers for teaching literacy in all subjects and at all levels of education
- ✓ structures for improving exchange of experiences and of good practices between countries.

But perhaps we need more than simple cooperation between Commission and Member States.

There is merit in giving serious thought to establishing a kind of “task –force” at a European level, that could provide assistance to every country that has been “left behind” in the field of literacy.

And there is also merit in giving serious consideration to establishing a fund –maybe in cooperation with the European Social Fund and other institutions- for providing directly the

essential means for children living in absolute poverty in regions suffering from the recent deep economic crisis –children, who otherwise would be excluded from education and would be even after the end of the crisis the illiterates in a coming, as we hope, affluent society.

I know, it sounds, and maybe it is, politically naïve.

But if we all agree that

- ✓ high levels of literacy are the prerequisite for sustainable economic development and
- ✓ equity between citizens and between regions and member-states is a prerequisite for stability and social cohesion in Europe,

then thinking “out of the box” may be necessary.

I am confident that you, Ministers of Education of all Member States and Commissioner Vassiliou, will address all relevant issues of literacy in the best possible way, based on the existing solid scientific knowledge, and I hope that the report of the High Level Group of Experts in Literacy will prove to be a valuable tool in your work.