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Saumendra Nath De  
saumendra.de18@stjohns.edu

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## **The Impact of Demographics in the Equity of Global Literacy Education**

**Saumendra Nath De**

**St. John's University**

### **Author Note**

Saumendra Nath De is an international civil servant who currently lives in New York City. He is from a science background with a Bachelor's degree in Physics and a Master's degree in Information Technology. He also holds an MBA degree, Master's of Philosophy (MPhil) in Business Administration, and a Master's in Conflictology. He is globally certified in professional disciplines by international accrediting bodies and an active member of many professional organizations.

For over two decades, Saumendra Nath De has been a public sector governance professional with key competencies in public administration, oversight, and policy formulation. The author has worked at senior positions in various countries including India, the Sultanate of Oman, Haiti, and the United States. At St. John's University, he is studying the theoretical and practical knowledge bases on successful formulation and implementation of educational policy and programs for at-risk learners.

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### **Abstract**

The right to education has been recognized as a basic human right in a number of international conventions including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The issues of fairness, equal opportunity, and equity in education, however, continue to plague the educational world. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2017), there are 750 million illiterate adults in the world, six out of ten children and adolescents are not learning globally, and low-income countries are home to a disproportionately large share of children and adolescents not learning. A plethora of demographic factors affects equity in education. This article discusses how the personal and social circumstances arising from acute poverty, low socio-economic status, gender, race, ethnicity, low parental education, and a multiplicity of socio-political milieu have impacted literacy achievements of children and shaped the literacy divide among the world. The impact of demographics on the equity of education has obvious policy implications. Attention is drawn on the overarching importance to understand and acknowledge how demographics affect education and how the repertoire of knowledge on these demographics can be utilized by the policy makers and educators for necessary adaptations and accommodations to derive policies, teaching practices, and interventions that promote equity in global literacy education.

*Keywords:* demographics, global literacy, equity in education, literacy policy implications

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### **Introduction**

Literacy is defined as the process of using reading, writing, and oral language to extract, construct, integrate, and critique meaning through interaction and involvement with multimodal texts in the context of socially situated practices (Frankel, Becker, Rowe, & Pearson, 2017). It encompasses a wide range of beliefs, attitudes, and social practices that literate individuals and social groups follow in a variety of settings and situations (Pearson & Raphael, 1999). Literacy is “inextricable” from the social, cultural, institutional, and political practices in and through which the individuals read, write, speak and listen (Gee, 1999, p. 356).

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights has recognized the ability to read and write as a fundamental human right. The 1962 Convention against Discrimination in Education was the first international instrument to cover the right to education that has a binding force in international law. Education has been an essential prerequisite for socio-economic progress of an individual that eventually leads to the development and growth of a community, society, or country. However, equity in global literacy education has eluded the children of the world. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report of 2017 has identified 264 million children and youth across the world to be deprived of adequate educational opportunities due to a plethora of social, cultural and economic factors. From the experience of working as an international civil servant, I have recognized how the multiplicity of demographic factors including acute poverty, low socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, gender, parental education, culture, and family engagement have impacted the equity of education in the world. The 2018 Report of International Literacy Association (ILA) on “What’s Hot in Literacy” also has identified Equity in Literacy Education to rank 8 among the 17 hot topics and 2 in terms of importance. The lack of education

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continues to prevail among the economically and socially marginalized students although they needed it most for empowerment to lift them and their families out of the vicious cycle of poverty and marginalization. In this article, I have endeavored to throw some light on the impact of demographic factors in the equity of global literacy education and how important it is for administrators and teachers to understand the demographics and their impact on education for effective literacy pedagogy.

### **Equity Vis-à-vis the Literacy Divide**

The word *equity* has its own nuances, but if equal access to education and equal opportunity for literacy achievement are construed as the central themes of equity in education, then unfortunately the global literacy divide has eclipsed equity if not overtaken it. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report of 2017, the adult literacy rate remains at 65 percent in sub-Saharan Africa and 61 percent in low-income countries. The number of adults in the world with no literacy skills is 750 million. More than 100 million young people across the world cannot read including more than one in four in sub-Saharan Africa and low-income countries. The UNESCO Report has identified that inequality in literacy and numeracy proficiency by socio-economic status is widespread. The Report has also identified the demographic factors such as gender, location, and wealth to have impacted the equity in education. Only 66 percent of countries in the world have achieved gender parity in primary education, 45 percent in lower secondary, and 25 percent in upper secondary. Furthermore, 75 adolescents from rural areas completed lower secondary education in 2010-2015 for every 100 from urban areas. Although the global completion rate was 69 percent, only 12 percent of the poorest males and 8 percent of the poorest females completed lower secondary.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Table 13.2 of p.187 of the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2017

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The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), the nationally representative and continuing assessment of English language literary skills of American adults of age 16 and older, has identified 11 million adults to be non-literate in English and 30 million to fall at below basic prose literacy level with Hispanics and Black adults accounting for 39 and 20 percent respectively of the below basic population. According to NAAL, the United States ranks fifth on adult literacy skills when compared to other industrialized nations. The large-scale assessment of adult skills in 2011-12, called the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), indicated that although the U.S. adult population performed on par with the international average in literacy, it had a higher percentage of low performers than the international average in all subject areas. According to PIAAC, over 75 percent of U.S. unemployed adults have an educational level up to high school diploma or less and around 50 percent of them performed at the bottom proficiency levels in numeracy. The National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008 indicated that every year, one in three young adults (equivalent to 12 million people), drop out of high school. According to the Commission, about two million immigrants come to US each year in search of jobs and better lives, but around 50 percent of them have low literacy levels and lack high school education and English language skills. The National Center for Families Learning (NCFL), a US based organization working to eradicate poverty through education solutions for families, has identified low family income and a mother's lack of education to be the two biggest risk factors that hamper a child's early learning and development. Children's reading scores improve when their parents are involved in helping them learn to read; b unfortunately, with the literacy divide in the world where 39 percent of the adults are illiterate including 41 million adults in the United States who are either illiterate in English or fall below the basic proficiency level in English, the inequality in educational opportunities starts at home.

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### **The Relation Between Socio-economic Status and Literacy Achievement**

In the Equality of Education Opportunity Survey, Coleman Study (1966) confirmed that a strong correlation exists between all kinds of academic achievement variables and socio-economic status (SES). White (1982) in his pioneering meta-analytic study, mentioned that the existence and strength of this relationship is so widely accepted that it is often cited as a self-evident fact. Indeed, SES is a powerful predictor of a child's academic achievement. One of the well-known measures of SES is the Index of Status Characteristics (Warner, Mecker, & Eells, 1949). This method uses information about the family's (a) occupation of principal breadwinner, (b) source of income, (c) quality of housing, and (d) status of dwelling area to arrive at a score convertible to one of five social classes. There are some disagreements on the combination of variables used in measuring SES, conceptual meaning of SES, and using SES and social class interchangeably in many empirical studies. Nevertheless, Sirin (2005) in a meta-analytic review indicated an apparent agreement on Duncan, Featherman, and Duncan's (1972) definition of the tripartite nature of SES that incorporates parental income, parental education, and parental occupation as the three main indicators of SES. A number of studies have indicated that inadequate well-being including poverty and cumulative negative environmental factors have significant impact on literacy outcomes of students. (Duncan, G., Brooks-Gunn, J. & Klebanov, P., 1994; Smith, J., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Klebanov, P., 1997; & Biro, M., Smederevac, S., & and Tovilovic, S., 2009). Nambissan (2010) focused on the education of children in poverty, taking India as a lens in her study on poverty and education from an Indian perspective. She identified how poverty-stricken children experience multiple deprivations including ill-health, hunger, malnutrition, and neglected school environments that affect their learning. Nambissan advocated for the right teaching method for disadvantaged students based on what "good teaching" (Haberman, 1991; Connell 1994) for

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disadvantaged children could be. She also reflected on the development of appropriate curriculum and raised concerns on the proliferation of private schools that look into the interests of the rich only. Hartley (2010) studied the relationship between education and global economic crisis and advocated for a shift in the rhetoric of regulation in education in the wake of economic crisis. Both White (1982) and Sirin's (2005) analytical reviews showed that school success had greatly been affected by students' SES. Sirin's (2005) findings indicated that the American society may be failing in one of the greatest commitments of every modern society, that is, the responsibility to provide educational opportunities for each student regardless of social and economic background.

### **The Effect of Psychosocial Factors and Literacy Outcomes**

Childhood poverty and development are complex phenomena and involve dynamic interactions of biological and psychosocial elements (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). A number of empirical studies have indicated that a child's SES affects his/her overall cognitive ability and literacy achievement (Bracey, 1996; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998). Lipina, Segretin, and Hermida (2013) analyzed the impact of poverty on the development of executive control or neuro-cognitive development through information based on the assessment of combined neurocognitive paradigms and the identification of specific environmental mediators and concluded that children with unsatisfied basic needs had lower efficacy on cognitive tasks. Amstrong (2010) indicated that poverty leads to malnutrition and neurological deficits that in turn impact brain function and affect learning. Likewise, Biro, Smederevac, and Tovilovic (2009) have indicated that socio-economic status, parents' education, financial health, and stimulating educational climate affect the cognitive development and scholastic achievement. Ayoub et al. (2009) emphasized the positive effects of Early Head Start on cognitive skill performance among young children living in poverty. SES is associated with cognitive performance because higher



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SES students have greater access to high quality education and resources that increase their chances in completing cognitively stimulating activities (Farah et al., 2006). Thus, the impact of low SES on the cognitive ability of individuals and their literacy performance cannot be understated.

### **Parental Education and Involvement**

Parental education and motivations from home are key not only for educational achievement but also for educational awareness and ascribing value to its importance. It is a formidable challenge to impart education to a child belonging to a household where people remained uneducated across generations. Griffin and Morrison (1997) found that home literacy environment affects literacy development and educational outcomes in different ways. The parental educational engagement entails: (a) involvement at school, (b) involvement at home, and (c) academic socialization (Epstein 1987; Fan & Chen 2001; Hill & Tyson 2009). All three types of parental educational involvement are positively linked in varying degrees to students' academic success (Lee & Croninger 1994; Gutman & Midgley 2000; Fan & Chen 2001). Home-based involvement includes multiple academic activities that reinforce school-based learning such as aid for homework, educational monitoring, support and enrichment, while the school-based involvement includes parents' active participation in school activities and ongoing communication with the teachers. Academic socialization, on the other hand, entails parents' educational expectations for the child and their viewpoints on the importance of education. Low-income parents exhibit lower educational expectations for their children (Davis-Kean 2005; Carolan & Wasserman 2015). Their educational involvement at home and school are also much less (Cheadle & Amato 2011; Roksa & Potter 2011). The low level of parental involvement is primarily attributable to low educational level and pressures of livelihood among low-income parents. This

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has a significant bearing on the educational lives and academic outcomes of children from low SES families.

### **The Dynamics of Race, Gender, and Socio-political Milieu on Literacy**

Children from ethnic minority communities are disproportionately affected by poverty and educational opportunities (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2002). No wonder that they are more prone to academic failures. The National Center for Education Statistics, under the US Department of Education, in its report on Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2017, indicated that the literacy attainment and progress in the United States on key indicators of educational performance varies among the students of various racial groups/ethnicity including White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. The Report showed that the reading achievement gaps between White and Black students in 2015 (26 points) at grade 4, and between White and Hispanic students in 2015 (20 points) at grade 12 were not measurably different from respective gaps in 1992, indicating the persistent trends in literacy gaps. The report also indicated that in 2014, the percentage of adults of age 25 and older who had not completed high school was higher for Hispanic adults (35 percent) than for adults in any other racial/ethnic group ranging from 18 percent for American Indian/Alaska Native adults to a low of 8 percent for White adults. The McKinsey & Company's 2009 report on The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in American Schools indicated that Black and Latino students are approximately two to three years of learning behind White students of same age. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report of 2017, only 66% of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education, 45% in lower secondary, and 25% in upper secondary. The Report indicated wide gender gaps in Information and Communication Technology skills including those in some developed countries. For example, about 75 women for

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every 100 men could use basic arithmetic formulas in a spreadsheet in Italy, Germany, and Netherlands. Grant and Sleeter (1986) raised concerns on education literature's failure to conceptualize race, social class, and gender as integrated issues and advocated for more attention on their integration. For example, according to the researchers, if one integrates race and gender, one recognizes each sex within racial groups, and different racial groups within each gender.

Blazevski, Petreski, and Ristovska (2017) noted that the cultural perspective is related to the pathways in which the cultures, values, and norms of poor communities affect the development and aspiration of a child. Race, ethnicity, language, and culture sometimes lead to socio-political discrimination, oppression, and marginalization. For example, we have witnessed how the policies of apartheid in South African higher education created separatism and fundamental inequality. Civil war and internal conflicts have adversely affected the education in many countries of the world including South Sudan, Congo, Mali, Sudan, Central African Republic, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Lai and Thyne (2007) demonstrated the negative effects of civil wars and post-civil-war environment on education and students' enrollment. According to the World Development Report of 2018 by the World Bank, in Syrian Arab Republic, which achieved universal primary enrollment in 2000, the civil war had driven 1.8 million children out of school by 2013. Acknowledging the vulnerabilities of children affected by war-torn countries and the development of need-specific educational policies and programs are the keys for academic progress of at-risk students. With the ever-changing demographics in the educational world, the equality of education will remain elusive if different forms of discrimination and deprivations deeply rooted in the social system in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, culture, and other socio-political factors are not adequately addressed by the educators and policy makers not only to eradicate all forms of

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discrimination from the education sector but also to adopt a strategy of equal opportunities and equal treatment in education for all.

### **The Vicious Cycle of Poverty and Illiteracy**

Literacy has the potential to unlock poverty, but poverty locks literacy. Thus, the vicious cycle of poverty and illiteracy continues among socio-economically disadvantaged groups of people in many parts of the world. Chouhan (2013) conducted a study on literacy and educational attainment of a marginalized class of people in India, called Scheduled Castes in the Maldah District of the State of West Bengal, and identified that social discrimination and lack of welfare measures had impacted literacy among the marginalized group of people for successive generations. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) Global Education database for the year ending in 2017, the lack of education continues to be influenced by wealth, with significant gaps between out-of-school rates in the world's richest and poorest countries. For example, the out-of-school rate for youth of upper secondary school age in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia is 57 and 47.8 percent respectively while that for Europe and Northern America is only 6.5 percent. Breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and illiteracy is imperative for higher productivity, socio-economic growth, and greater human capital on this planet. There are erroneous beliefs that relative reading achievements are immutable, and that poverty creates ceilings on reading expectations and abilities. Phillips, Hayward, and Norris (2011) challenged these erroneous beliefs in their argument on six mistaken beliefs about persistent reading disabilities and indicated that relative reading achievement is not immutable; poverty impacts but doesn't create ceilings on reading achievements. These myths have held us back over the years from identifying root causes of learning difficulties among children and exploring appropriate interventions. Children with poor learning abilities in early school years can catch up later and

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children from low SES can outperform students from higher SES if the root causes of learning difficulties are identified and the reasons for their difficulties are considered for the purposes of intervention. Mistaken beliefs despite corrective efforts can be deceptive for protracted periods. It is therefore imperative to challenge the delusions and irrational beliefs surrounding the persistent reading disabilities and vicious cycle of illiteracy to adopt an integrated, holistic approach for implementing more purposeful and effective learning strategy interventions for students deprived from the equity of education.

### **Implications for Educational Policy**

The impact of demographics on the equity of education has serious policy implications. It is imperative for educators and policy makers to understand and acknowledge that each student's academic life is heavily influenced by various demographic characteristics including socio-economic status, family income and education, gender, race, culture, and ethnicity. Eng (2013) propounded that demographics tell us what issues we are dealing with and what kind of society we are becoming. For example, a higher population of immigrants suggests the need to increase bilingual education. Eng (2013) further opined that the current school reform model, based on equality, is well-intentioned and politically correct, but is an antiquated solution for unleashing innovation since it ignores inherent demographic differences. Gustafson (2002) argued that the current emphasis on standardized testing offers an environment that is too rigid and fundamental to allow low-SES students to excel, and educators must be allowed to explore various other methods to make learning comprehensive, interesting, and successful for these students. It is also important to bear in mind that conventional teaching methods do not serve all groups equitably and not all intervention programs are beneficial. Many children who should be capable of reading well cannot do so, which suggests that the instructional methods available to them are not

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appropriate (Pressley, 1998). Some children may need introductions to print concepts, phonological awareness and/or the structure of narrative, some may need more instructional time or one-to-one tutoring, while some others may need motivational support and a coordinated intervention and classroom instruction. Inadequate consideration of demographic factors by teachers and educators has deterred appropriate instructional methods and/or correct interventions to address the deficient learning outcomes of students of various demographic characteristics. Tailoring the intervention to the needs of students is imperative if it is to be effective and beneficial to the students. Several studies (Whitehurst et al. 1994; McCormick & Mason, 1986) have indicated that parent and teacher training to improve preliteracy experiences can foster emergent academic skills in low-SES children.

Deficiencies in early education have long-term impact on the future educational outcome of children. Chittleborough, Mittinty, Lawlor & Lynch (2014) indicated that children of low socio-economic position are 2-3 times more likely than children of high socio-economic position to have poor educational outcomes at ages 15-16. A number of theorists opined that improving school entry academic skills of disadvantaged students result in reducing the proportion of children with poor educational outcomes. Duncan and Magnuson (2013) established positive effects on development of pre-school interventions for low-income African American children on the basis of their study and evaluation of the results of the impacts of early childhood education programs. The power of informal education or community involvement in raising the literacy levels of disadvantaged population was also explored. Dorfman and Fisher (2002) indicated that partnerships between schools, families, and communities strongly affect student achievement. Michael, Dittus, & Epstein (2007) also established that school community partnerships help to improve school attendance, better student behavior, and more effective discipline. Zyngier (2017), on the other

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hand, demonstrated how experiential learning in an informal setting promotes class equity and social and economic justice for children from underprivileged communities. Benner, Boyle, and Sadler (2016) established through their study that integrating parental involvement strategies into educational interventions would be more effective if strategically targeted. For example, academic supports or interventions with students from higher SES groups may want to focus more on promoting parents' educational expectations and the clear communication of these expectations to their children. Conversely, programs or interventions serving the disadvantaged children with low SES background may want to make greater efforts to encourage parents' active involvement in school-based activities. Overall, there is an overarching need for policy makers to focus on demographics to inculcate teaching interventions that address the divergent learning needs and concerns of diverse group of students and promote equity in education.

### **Conclusion**

“Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals to develop their knowledge and potential and to participate fully in their community and wider society” (UNESCO Education Sector Position Paper (2004), *The Plurality of Literacy and its Implications for Policies and Programmes*, p. 13). The United Nations in its 2015 resolution (A/RES/70/1 of 25 September 2015) has set inclusive and equitable education as one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals known as “Transforming our World-the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” or Agenda 2030. (United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda Plan document, 2015, p.4 prepared in compliance with the global sustainable development goals adopted by all member countries in the high-level summit of September 2015 and published in UN public website). The United Nations has set up a target of 100 percent free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education for all boys and girls of the world by 2030. This is a formidable

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task and educators and policy makers around the world have shared responsibilities to achieve this. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report of 2017, more than 100 million people cannot read, and 87million children (56%) of primary school age have not attained the minimum proficiency level in reading around the world. The report indicated that the richest 3- to 4-year-olds were five times as likely to attend organized learning as the poorest across 52 low and middle-income countries in 2010-15. The adult literacy rate is below 60% in low income countries. A range of demographic factors influence the equity of global literacy education. Many children face difficult challenges as discussed above including acute poverty, socio-economic marginalization, and lack of parental support and learning motivation leading to limited background knowledge, inadequate interests in education, learning disabilities, poor school attendance, and drop outs. A multitude of social, cultural, and political viewpoints exist to address equity in education that range from theocratic to aristocratic, and from democratic to plutocratic. These ideologies influence how literacy is approached, developed, and utilized in diverse school settings across the world. There is, however, unanimity that assistance is needed from various stakeholders to address the educational challenges, but that requires proper funding and appropriate policies that often remain elusive

In the wake of globalization, technological advancements, and multiple socio-political upheavals including civil war and conflicts in many parts of the world, many countries today including the United States are experiencing significant influxes of immigrants who may be unfamiliar with the language and culture of their new country. This has further altered the demographics in education and requires policy makers to consider adaptations and accommodations if students are to succeed within such situations. For example, understanding the difficult stages one goes through in learning a second language, especially in an immersion



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situation, is very important for educators. There is no one method or approach that works for all learners of diverse characteristics. Equity demands inclusion, objectivity, and fairness. It entails an education system with the potential of reaching out to all learners of a plural society. If equity in global literacy education is considered as an essential attribute of human dignity on this planet, then recognizing the overpowering impact of demographics in it is pivotal to spearheading teaching policies and practices towards promoting equality amid diversity in the educational world.

### *Disclaimer:*

The views expressed by the author are personal and have nothing to do with his official capacity.

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