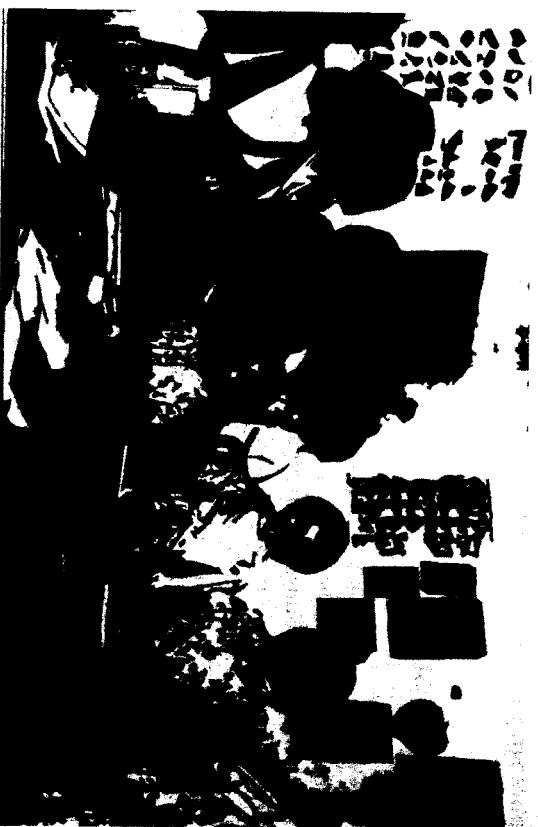# A Portrait of Literacy From the Youth Millennium Project

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If I like a photograph, if it disturbs me, I linger over it. What am I doing the whole time I remain with it? I look at it, I scrutinize it, as if I wanted to know more about the thing or the person it represents.

—Barthes (1981, p. 99)

CLOSE-UP

There are 12 children in the photograph, most of them standing around a large wooden desk. The smallest child, a girl, is sitting down, looking directly at the camera. Behind her is a teacher, standing protectively, her attention diverted away from the camera. She is wearing a beautiful blue and yellow shalwar kameez—a long shirt over loose trousers—with a scarf draped over her shoulders. On the one side of the desk, a group of girls and boys in school uniforms, ranging in age from about 11 to 14, stand close together. They are smiling at the younger children, all girls, on the opposite side of the desk. The girls are wearing brightly colored floral dresses, and one is smiling shyly at the older children. Books, pens, and pencils lie scattered on the table. On the walls are colorful letters of the English alphabet, pictures of fruits and vegetables, and a drawing of a tree, with the title "GREEN DAY Tree" in large letters above it. There is also a drawing of a hand, with the letters a, e, i, o, u, on each of the fingers, the word "VOWELS" serving as the title of the drawing.

This photograph is a portrait of literacy: students, teacher, desk, pens, papers, books, posters. What distinguishes it from many other familiar portraits of literacy, however, is the unique story that frames it. The story of this photograph serves as the substance of this chapter.

ZOOMING OUT

This photograph was taken in June 2001. The location is an orphanage for Afghan children in the teeming city of Karachi, Pakistan. The girls in the floral dresses are young Afghan orphans; the children on the left side of the photograph are visitors from Model Elementary School in Karachi. The visiting students are participating in the global Youth Millennium Project (YMP) of the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada. Referring to themselves as "The Reformers," the children at Model Elementary have chosen to implement a project that they have called Literacy for All, in which they are supporting the young girls depicted in the photograph. The Reformers describe the project as follows:

We have collected books (story and reference) and stationery items to give as gifts to underprivileged youth, as a move to help them read and write. We have selected a nearby orphanage which looks after 25 children of ages 3–13 of "Afghan War Refugees" to give away all our collection. Our action plan was very exciting and completed in three months. This project was part of our English and Social Studies curriculum of the first term. We have carried out many interesting activities during this project.

In their June 2001 report to coordinators of the YMP at UBC, the students outlined how they planned to extend their Literacy for All project in September, 2001:

Our next YMP action plan is an extension of this plan during which we have focused on literacy. But this time, we plan to organize English speaking classes for the same group of children in the "Afghan orphanage." We will conduct at 15 classes of 2 hours each during which we will teach these students simple English phrases, used for daily life communication. We will take up this project 2nd Term beginning September 2001.

The children's extension of their YMP project never took place. Since 9/11, when the United States of America was attacked and an international force retaliated against Pakistan's neighbouring country, Afghanistan, students at Model Elementary have seen refugees pouring into the city of Karachi; they have experienced temporary school closures; and they have witnessed a region in turmoil. The story of their Literacy for All YMP project needs to be told. It not only represents a moment of hope in a time of despair, but provides important insights into the students' perceptions of literacy and their investment in the English language.

THE RESEARCH FILTER

In October 2000, I had the good fortune to visit Model Elementary School while participating in the annual SPELT (Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers) conference of Pakistan's English language educators. I was excited to find that there was much interest in implementing YMP in this school, and considered myself ideally placed to conduct research on the ways in which students responded to this social action opportunity. The research study was thus conducted concurrently with the implementation of the YMP. The first stage of the study (March–June, 2001) included 40 male and 40 female students of approximately 12 to 13 years of age, whereas the second stage of the research (October–December, 2001) included 26 students, 13 girls and 13 boys from the larger sample. The research sample also included four teachers of language and social studies, as well as the head of the language department and the head of social studies. Methods of data collection in the first stage of the research included completion of a questionnaire by students and participating teachers, and on-site observation of classrooms.

It was the data collected in the second stage of the research (October–December 2001) that gave particular insight into the students' conceptions of literacy and the English language. I addressed the following two

questions to 26 students (13 girls and 13 boys) in an e-mail exchange in October 2001:

Question 1: I think it is very interesting that although you had considered a number of action plans dealing with social issues, the one that you decided to implement was about literacy. I have no doubt that your efforts to help the Afghan refugee children in your community were very welcome. I have a number of questions about this project. Why did you decide to focus on literacy? Why do you think literacy is important? How can children become literate?

Question 2: You said in your student report that your next step would be to help the Afghan children learn some simple English phrases. Why did you choose this as the next step?

After providing a theoretical frame to the research, the photograph and the Literacy for All project are analysed through three lenses. "The Lens of Social Action" addresses the genesis of the Literacy for All project, the expectations of stakeholders, and the conditions that needed to be in place for it to succeed. "The Lens of Literacy" addresses why the students chose to focus on literacy as an action plan, and what their conceptions of literacy were. "The Lens of English" addresses why the children chose English as the language they hoped to teach the Afghan refugee children, and how their investments in English were socially and historically constructed. Drawing on earlier work (Norton, 2000), I use the notion of "investment" to reference a learner's desire to learn a language in the context of shifting identities and unequal relations of power.

THE THEORETICAL FRAME

The theoretical framing of this discussion draws on work in social and critical literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Cope, Kalantzis, & New London Group, 2000; Freire, 1970; Heath, 1983; Kendrick, 2003; Luke, 2003; New London Group, 1996; Norton & Toohey, 2004). As these researchers note, educators who are interested in critical literacy are interested in literacy as a site of struggle, negotiation, and change. Whereas earlier psychological perspectives conceived of literacy as the acquisition of particular behaviors, cognitive strategies, and linguistic processing skills, more recent insights from ethnography, cultural studies, and feminist theory have led to increasing recognition that literacy is not only a skill to be learned, but a practice that is socially constructed and locally negotiated. In this view, literacy is best understood in the context of larger institutional practices—whether in the home, the school, the community, or the larger society. These institu-

tional practices, in turn, must be understood with reference to frequently inequitable access to social, economic, and political power.

THE LENS OF SOCIAL ACTION

The Literacy for All project was developed in the context of the students' involvement in the YMP (www.ympworld.org), a global initiative of UBC. YMP was motivated by research that suggests that youth often feel powerless in the face of global events, believing that they have little contribution to make to social change. It began in 1999 and currently comprises over 10,000 young people in 80 countries internationally. The goal of YMP is to provide youth with the opportunity to build self-confidence and community by creating a local plan of action that addresses a larger social issue. Local plans of action can be large or small, and include groups of students approximately 11 to 14 years of age. Schools learn of the project via diverse means. In Sri Lanka, for example, UNICEF in Colombo distributed information about the project to high school principals, some of whom passed on the message to the United Nations clubs in their schools. If there is interest in the project, schools register with the YMP at UBC, and are linked with three other schools internationally. At the conclusion of the project, students submit reports on their activities to a YMP coordinator at UBC. Thus the YMP seeks to encourage community building within and across national boundaries.

Language and social studies teachers at Model Elementary were interested in the YMP because proficiency in English communication is one of the most important academic goals for most students in Pakistan, particularly for those residing in urban areas. Involvement in the YMP offered an opportunity for language learning as well as engagement in both the local and global community. It presented an opportunity to achieve mastery over English beyond use of conventions and decoding of text, and it provided an interesting dimension to existing English language and social studies curricula. Furthermore, YMP offered the possibility for innovation in classroom practices. In Model Elementary, the pedagogy of language and social studies is highly structured, with tests and examinations a central focus of the curriculum. By involving students in YMP, the Grade 8 teachers were hoping to bring about pedagogical change and to create the conditions for active engagement in learning. The teachers were enthusiastic about incorporating a more dialogue-based pedagogy into their classrooms.

The students who participated in the YMP project were mostly second, and in some cases third, language speakers of English. Urdu enjoys the status of the "national language" as well as the *lingua franca* in Pakistan, and almost all the students at Model Elementary are comfortable in communicat-

ing in Urdu orally. At home, the majority of students speak two or more languages, including Urdu, English, and one of the regional languages. Nevertheless, English is the medium of instruction in Model Elementary, and having command over written and spoken English promotes social and economic success in Pakistani society.

A day before the first discussion of the YMP project in spring 2001, teachers encouraged students to listen to national and international news on television and to read a few newspaper articles. The next day, there was much animated discussion on local and global issues. The first impressions students had in identifying social problems were of distress: "I never realised there are so many problems around us," said one of the Reformers. "I thought a lot about the 'poor children' and the 'homeless' ones even after the discussion was over and when I was at home," said another. "We were extremely confused when we went on talking and discussing about so many problems in the society, we thought it's a bad world and scary too," said a third.

The YMP provided an opportunity for students to improve their understanding of political and democratic processes. After expressing concern about social conditions both locally and globally, students focussed their attention on how they could address the inequities they had identified. Some, in despair, looked for magical solutions: As one said, "How come I never knew of anything like this before. I wish I have magic wand to put every thing straight." For most students, however, it was through debate and discussion that they seemed to regain some confidence. As one said, "Our group members and teachers asked each other what can be done and from here we actually felt better that something can be done." Through their local action plans, students considered themselves capable of making a difference to their community and were eager to do something beyond chalk and talk. As one of the teachers commented, "By identifying the global issues, their minds opened from self to society, to other communities, from their country to other countries of the world."

Although the Reformers had identified different action plans, the one they decided to implement in the first stage of the project was a literacy program for Afghan refugee children in a local orphanage. Because these children lacked school supplies and resources, the Reformers planned to collect storybooks, reading materials, and stationery items appropriate for children aged 3 to 13. The texts they chose were all in English. Their slogan was a "a pencil a person." The students' idea was that if each person on the larger school campus of Model Elementary donated a pencil, they could collect hundreds of pencils that would make a great difference to the Afghan children. In order to achieve this objective, the students undertook the following activities in April and May, 2001:

- The students designed and displayed posters and memos to publicise their cause and draw the attention of other classes in the school. They invited all students to donate books, stationery, and pencils.

- Pairs of students gave talks in the staff room, principal's office, and in all other sections of the school.

- Students collected, sorted, categorized, and packed the collected books and supplies for distribution.

- The Reformers then delivered the packages to the orphanage and interacted with the Afghan children and their teachers—a visit captured in the photograph described earlier.

During their involvement in YMP, students encountered learning opportunities that gave them the opportunity to critically reflect on social issues both locally and globally. One enthusiastic youth responded, "Despite it created some problems, action planning was the most interesting part of the project. This type of project work can give us more information, involve us mentally and physically in action planning." Most of the students said that they were shocked to find that there are so many problems in the world that need attention, and that YMP made them more aware of the world and their immediate environment. As one said, "We got an opportunity to become aware of local and global issues and to think how to solve them." Although the students recognized that they "cannot solve the problems completely," they felt sufficiently confident to begin addressing the problems they had identified. With reference to the Afghan children, in particular, one student noted, "I liked going out of the school to make presentations and to the orphanage," while another observed, "We expect that by providing education to others, we can improve our environment and community."

THE LENS OF LITERACY

The photograph I described depicts a literacy classroom where there are posters, pencils, desks, and chairs. The students at Model Elementary were committed to the notion that all children should have access to literacy, and had many insights about the importance of literacy in the wider community. Significantly, the students held the view that literacy is not only about reading and writing, but about education more broadly. "The word literate is known as to educate," said Samira, while Salma, similarly, noted that "The worldly meaning of literacy is educated or having education." Other students, however, extended this view to include the notion that a literate person has greater ability to reason than one who is illiterate. Shahid,

for example, noted that a literate person "can make better decisions" than an illiterate person, while Kamran said that "If we are not literate we cannot do any work with thinking." The comment by Fariha perhaps summarizes best the views of many of the students:

Literacy is very important because education gives understanding to people. The thinking of an educated person is different and he thinks properly about his country and people. An uneducated person thinks differently. He thinks of taking revenge and fighting with their enemies, but an educated person wants to solve big problems and settle their dispute of territories by arranging dialogues. They realize and analyze the situation and an illiterate person does not have this ability.

While many students focused on the meaning of literacy for individual members of a community, other students focused on the importance of literacy for the development of a nation. "Literacy plays a vital role in the progress of a country," said Saman, whereas Nida noted passionately that "without education our beloved country Pakistan cannot develop." Indeed, Samira was of the opinion that "the person who is illiterate doesn't have any respect for his own country." The development of a country, students noted, lies in the education of children, "the stars of their countries." Thus, an investment in the education of children is an investment in the future.

Many students attributed the disparity between developed and developing countries to literacy practices, noting, in particular, the literacy challenges that Pakistan faces: "The literacy rate in our country is much less than well-developed countries," said Rubina. Others made the case that high levels of literacy give a country a competitive edge in international politics. Shahid, for example, noted, "If a nation didn't raise its literacy it can't compete with other nations and it can't maintain independence." Many students agreed that developed countries are powerful because people in developed countries are literate. As Ahmed said, "We know that in developed countries everyone is educated and goes to school. That is why they are rich and have no problems."

Students recognized, however, that resources—what Nida called "funds and donations"—are needed to promote literacy in a country, and they offered many suggestions as to how resources could be shared to promote literacy in the broader society. "The most important thing," said Javed, "is that the people who are already literate should give free tuition and support to poor people." Fariha, similarly, noted that if children are unable to pay school fees, "we can educate them by opening schools in which they will not have to pay the fees." Tahira reported on a conversation she had with a person she called a "childlabour," who had requested the provision of night school:

I spoke to a childlabour about education. They said that their parents are not able to earn enough in order to survive: . . . "If any one will open night school for us we will get education, because we are not free in the morning and after-noon."

In his recent work on literacy and development, Street (2001) makes the case that if literacy projects and programs are to be effective in diverse regions of the world, researchers need to understand the uses and meanings of literacy practices to local people themselves. In the developing world, in particular, he notes that development workers need to understand what counts as learning and education, and who has the right to define what education is. His own research in Iran provides convincing evidence that people perceived to be "illiterate' backward villagers" (p. 6) are engaged in diverse literacy practices, whether in traditional Quaranic schools or in the local fruit market. The consequences of ignoring or negating local experiences can have dire consequences. As Street notes:

Even though in the long run many local people do want to change their literacy practices and take on board some of those associated with Western or urban society, a crude imposition of the latter that marginalizes and denies local experience is likely to alienate even those who were initially motivated. (p. 7)

It is interesting to note to what extent the students' perceptions of literacy are consistent with current conceptions of literacy in Western academia. Like many contemporary theorists of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Cope et al., 2000; Heath, 1983; Luke, 2003), the students take the position that literacy requires more than an understanding of isolated symbols and discrete texts; they perceive literacy as associated with social and educational practices. Furthermore, like Street (2001), they recognize that "the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being" (p. 7).

In this regard, Samina's view that "the person who is illiterate doesn't have any respect for his own country" requires further analysis. Given Anderson's (1991) conception of the nation as an "imagined community" (p. 6) in which members of even the smallest nation don't meet or know most of the members of the nation, it is intriguing to consider the ways in which literacy practices, in general, and education, more specifically, serve to "invent" the nation. Indeed, Anderson makes the point that "print-capitalism . . . made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (p. 36). The data support the view that literacy is associated with nation building, and that students were acutely aware that the very idea of "beloved Pa-

kistan" was constructed through literacy practices in schools and in the wider community.

Significantly, however, students were also eager to use literacy to build relationships across nations, and imagined a global community in which nations can relate to one another on more equitable terms than currently exists. In this view, literacy would not only develop Pakistan, but enable Pakistan to connect more democratically with other nations, thereby promoting greater international stability and reducing the isolation of Pakistan. Such views suggest that the relationship between literacy and community building is perhaps even more profound than Anderson has predicted, transcending national boundaries, and emerging in a variety of ways.

THE LENS OF ENGLISH

Notwithstanding the native language of the Afghan children, English is the dominant language in the photograph: The walls are covered with colorful letters of the English language; the posters are titled in English; a drawing of a hand signals the 5 vowels of the English language. The photograph provides support for the students' decision to teach the Afghan children "some simple English phrases." Like notions of literacy, these students' responses to the importance of English were complex and can be summarized in a number of related themes about the perceived usefulness of English, both locally and internationally.

Students at Model Elementary were motivated by the belief that English is an international language and the language of science, technology, and the media. As Shahida said, "The English language is an international language spoken all over the world and it is the language of science. Therefore to promote their education and awareness with modern technologies, it is important to teach them English."

Students noted further that knowledge of English would enable the Afghan children to communicate directly with people all over the world, without the help of translators, and to explain to the wider community how much they had suffered. As Fariha noted, "English is the language spoken commonly. This language is understood throughout the world. If the Afghan children learn English, know English, speak English, they will be able to discuss their problems with the people of the world."

Students such as Jamshed also noted that English serves as a common language not only across nations, but within nations: "We choose this as our next step because English is the international and global media language and most of the Afghan immigrants do not know English and have no particular language to communicate with local people. Therefore we choose this as the next step so they can communicate with local people." Further-

more, it is knowledge of English, students believed, that would redress imbalances between developed and developing nations. As Salma said, "The world is not at all really aware of the problems faced by the people living not only in third world countries but also in far away nations due to lack of knowledge about their culture, and about their language."

Finally, many students noted that knowledge of English gives people access to resources that will give them greater opportunity in life. Fariha noted, for example, that with English, "Afghan children will be able to get admission in schools." Furthermore, knowledge of English would help the Afghan children develop their country when they return to Afghanistan. "If every citizen of the nation could take one step towards their betterment, they could follow the path of knowledge and success instead of the gun," said Zaib.

With only a few exceptions, the students demonstrated little ambivalence toward the English language and perceived it as an important tool for social, economic, and political advancement, within Pakistan as well as the international community. When students were pressed to consider whether the spread of English had any negative consequences, only two students noted that a country's native languages could be compromised, and only one noted that the spread of English would be accompanied by the spread of Western culture, "a bad sign." Such a positive evaluation of English needs to be understood against the backdrop of a substantial body of literature that suggests the spread of English is a form of Western imperialism, implicated in the loss of local and minority languages (Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Tollefson, 1991). An emerging body of research by scholars such as Canagarajah (1999), May (2001), and Brutt-Griffler (2002), takes up the challenge of earlier studies and helps to explain the students' investments in English.

In his seminal work, *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism* (1999), Canagarajah provides a number of important insights about the experiences of students living in what are sometimes called "periphery" communities—postcolonial communities that speak English as the first or dominant language, or have acquired English alongside one or more local languages. Such countries include India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Barbados, and Nigeria. Drawing on the work of postcolonial scholars such as hooks (1989, 1990) and Said (1979, 1993), Canagarajah (1999) argues that a particular "politics of location" (hooks, 1989) provides for a different understanding of the spread of English than that dominant in Western academia: "Just as center resistance is grounded in the social practice and cultural concerns of center communities, periphery thinking has to be shaped by its own location" (p. 35). He suggests that a number of Western academics who have investigated the effects of the global spread of English have been paralyzed by dichotomizing perspectives that frame debates about English—arguing for and against

English; for and against the vernacular (p. 3). He suggests, in contrast, that people can engage favorably with both English and the vernacular, and that people in marginalized communities have the human agency to think critically about their options and to work out ideological alternatives that promote their own empowerment. Furthermore, in arguing for what he calls the "resistance perspective," Canagarajah makes the case that both English and vernacular languages are sufficiently heterogeneous for diverse groups to make them serve their own purposes, and enable subjects to rise above their domination (p. 2).

May (2001), like Canagarajah (1999), argues that debates on the spread of English should be centrally concerned with the extent to which English is promoted at the expense of other languages in the public realm. By way of example, May cites the case of the English-only movement in the United States, which he describes as a deliberate attempt to marginalize other languages in the country. My research suggests that the students at Model Elementary, although being favorably disposed toward English, still had high regard for Urdu, and had no difficulty code-switching between Urdu and English as the need arose. Brutt-Griffler (2002), furthermore, makes the case that those who equate the spread of English with linguistic imperialism may overlook what she understands as a more essential element, which is the desire of diverse nations to link to the world at large. This desire, she suggests, should not be confused with attempts to link with the United States or the United Kingdom exclusively.

Clearly, the persistence of English in Pakistan is partly explained by Pakistan's geopolitical isolation. Pakistanis, like the Tamils in Canagarajah's (1999) study, have struggled for international connection and recognition, and have used English to reach out to international media, connect with the diaspora community, and communicate with hotlines and electronic mail. Pakistanis, like Tamils, have a powerful neighbor, India, that is not sympathetic to its interests; it has another neighbor, Afghanistan, that has been politically unstable for decades; and it has a government that has been struggling for legitimacy in a skeptical international community. Under these conditions, English provides Pakistanis with the opportunity to remain socially, economically, and politically connected—not only to the United States and United Kingdom but to the wider international community. The Model Elementary students in the photograph wanted to encourage the young girls in floral dresses to become global citizens.

A WIDE-ANGLE LENS

The photograph described at the beginning of this chapter, and the Literacy for All project, are best understood within the context of social and political instability, both nationally and internationally. The students at Model

Elementary valued their involvement in the YMP, but realized that they could not address all social problems. They appreciated being literate, but recognized that literacy is a privilege. They saw themselves as part of a larger community of English speakers, but acknowledged Pakistan's marginal status in the international community. The struggle for literacy, access to English, and educational change can be seen as interdependent, reflecting the desire of students in a postcolonial world to engage with the international community from a position of strength rather than weakness. I sought to understand the students' investments in English from a geopolitical and historical perspective, and suggested that the appropriation of English does not necessarily compromise identities structured on the grounds of linguistic or religious affiliation. The data suggest that English and the vernacular can coexist in mutually productive ways and that the "politics of location" (Canagarajah, 1999) has great explanatory value.

Furthermore, like Canagarajah (1999) and Luke (2004), I take the position that if we wish to understand the meaning of literacy in the students' lives, we cannot ignore the imperatives of the material world and the ways in which resources are distributed—not only nationally, but internationally. Canagarajah (1999) makes a compelling case that in periphery contexts in which there is a daily struggle for food, clothing, shelter, and safety, "a diet of linguistic guerilla warfare, textual resistance, and micro-politics will not suffice" (p. 34). Luke (2004), similarly, argues that while we as educators might debate the meaning of critical literacy, we may not do justice to the lived experiences of physical and material deprivation in diverse communities throughout the globe. The students in the study made frequent reference to the relationship between literacy, the distribution of resources, and international inequities. For these students, a community that is literate and skilled in English is also a community that has food, shelter, and peace.

However, it is of some concern that students might, in fact, overestimate the benefits that can accrue from the development of literacy and the spread of English. Ahmed's assessment, for example, that people who are educated "are rich and have no problems" may lead to a crisis of expectations. Furthermore, May (2001) makes a convincing argument that there is no necessary relationship between the adoption of English by developing countries and greater economic well-being. Of even more concern is the ways in which pedagogical and social practices may be serving, perhaps inadvertently, to reinforce the view held by the students that people who are literate are more rational and intellectually able than those who are not literate. If students in Pakistan, and perhaps in other parts of the world, equate literacy with rationality and intellectual ability, while at the same time embracing English as the international language of science, media, and technology, is there a danger that they may consider people who are lit-

erate in English as more rational and intellectually able than those who are not? Such a question requires greater depth of focus.

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