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## **The Phenomenon of Functional Illiteracy in the Light of Empirical Studies**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the article is to throw light on the phenomenon of contemporary functional illiteracy in the countries of the prosperous West. According to the international comparative studies and the ones conducted in several Western European countries, this phenomenon affects a great population of adults who fulfilled schooling obligation in childhood. The range of illiteracy has contributed to making literacy a significant political and educational issue and scrutinizing the problem of functional illiteracy by the scientists. The article outlines some of the threads interesting to the illiteracy researchers in German and English language areas. These are issues connected with conceptualisation of illiteracy phenomenon, its causes and results, and the problems of learning of adult illiterates. The contemporary concepts of literacy and programs focused on improving literacy skills emphasize “dispersion” of literacy practices, their embedding in individuals’ localness and subjectivity. This questions all the attempts of imposing universal standards and the only right language patterns. Individuals’ needs within the scope of the ability to read and write are highly particularized; they depend on life situations, needs and interests of individuals. With regard to the reasons for illiteracy, there is a conviction dominating in the scientific milieu that they are rooted mainly in social and economic poverty as well as improper socialization in family and school, although other “dysfunctional contexts” are noticed in illiterate people’s lives. What is more, the effects of illiteracy cannot be generalized. Admittedly, functional illiteracy carries risk of social exclusion, still, it does not affect all people with low literacy skills. With regard to teaching and learning of illiterates, there is consistency concerning compliance with the principle of

subjectivity and approach according to the needs and abilities of learners. The validity of using biographical methods and necessity of professionalization of educators working with illiterates are emphasized.

**Key words:** functional illiteracy, literacy, illiteracy, literacy practices, research

In the last decades of the 20th century, functional illiteracy reoccurred as a social issue in the countries of the prosperous West. This “modern illiteracy”, that is, illiteracy occurring despite common schooling obligation implemented within the frameworks of modern, developed educational systems, is a phenomenon which should be scrutinized from other perspective than in the case of primary illiteracy, identified with the regions of the world where education is not commonly accessible and obligatory, does not meet basic quality requirements or the obligation is not enforced. A modern illiterate has grown up in the culture of literacy and encountered the written word at school, in family and everyday life; therefore, the most often, contemporary illiteracy does not mean a complete inability to read and write. Illiterates know the particular letters of the alphabet, are able to write and read simple words; however, they do not understand complex sentences and texts and do not know how to write them. The researchers state that it is not the question of who cannot read and write but what the level of people’s literacy is (Nuisl 1999, p. 531).

The “discovery” of the fact that illiteracy affects a large part of societies of the digital era first caused confusion and disbelief. “It is staggering that over the years millions of children have been leaving school hardly able to read and write, and that today millions of adults have the same problems. Roughly 20% of adults – that is perhaps as many as 7 million people – have more or less severe problems with basic skills, in particular with what is generally called ‘functional literacy’ and ‘functional numeracy’: ‘the ability to read, write and speak in English, and to use mathematics at a level necessary to function in work and in society in general’. It is a shocking state of affairs in this rich country...” – said British Department for Education and Skills in 1999 (as cited in: Howard 2007, p. 33). In some European Union countries (e.g. Great Britain), politicians’ reaction was relatively quick: they proclaimed great literacy programmes already in the 70s of the past century. Other countries (e.g. Germany, Austria, Switzerland) delayed taking proper actions to reduce the range of illiteracy for at least two decades. Nevertheless, at the turn of the 21st century, most of the European Union countries could not or did not want belittle the problem any-

more. Sample surveys carried out in France in 2004 and 2005, in England in 2003 and 2011, and in Germany in 2011 showed that the percentage of complete and functional illiterates is much more higher than in the worst-case scenarios. In France, it is 9% of the working-age population, in England – 15%, in Germany – 14.5% (Grotlüschen, Riekmann 2012, p. 20 and the following). For instance, Germany, which noticed functional illiteracy only in the 90s, started the decade of literacy in 2015. Next years' agenda lists dozens of educational and research projects, developments of educational concepts including those concerning providing support for self-education of illiterate persons, so that – as the Minister of Education emphasizes – “more people dare to improve their reading and writing skills also in later stages of life” (BMBF 2015).

Currently, the phenomenon of functional illiteracy in the countries of the prosperous West has been quite well-recognised. It has been scrutinised by the representatives of many scientific fields; among others, history, anthropology, ethnography, sociology, education studies, sociolinguistics, philology, theory of communication and information or cybernetics. The exploration of the phenomenon of functional illiteracy has been promoted by the educational policy which – recognizing improvement of literacy as political and cross-society task, especially important from the perspective of social and economic development – enforces research studies concerning its different aspects. Undoubtedly, illiteracy is embroiled in a number of social, political, economic and educational contexts. It can be also placed in the context of social inclusion/exclusion occurring as the result of repressive functioning of a language in almost all areas of a social life. Below, one can find the main research areas and trends which have contributed to recognition of the essence of contemporary illiteracy within the past decades. The overview includes, among others, population-based surveys, life story and narrative inquiries, statistical studies and scientific reflections on the conditions and results of functional illiteracy, as well as the specific character of a target group and courses for illiterate persons. The overview of the previous threads of scientific thoughts concerning modern functional illiteracy constitutes an attempt of outlining the essence of this social phenomenon.

## **1. Modern concepts of literacy and their consequences for literacy improvement**

Defining what literacy is and what part it is playing in lives of individuals and its impact on their functioning constituted the primary issue for the research on the modern phenomenon of functional illiteracy. The breakthrough in the

international scientific discussion on the essence of literacy was done by the researchers involved in New Literacy Studies lead by a British researcher, Brian Street. He questioned “one culture – one literacy” thesis dominating in science in the second half of the 20th century. The belief concerning homogeneity of a literacy practice was juxtaposed with the concept of “social literacies” (cf. Street 1995), highlighting plurality of literacy practices conditioned by individual factors, life situations and social and cultural contexts of individuals. “That literacy is a social practice is an insight both banal and profound. It is banal in the sense that it is obvious that literacy is always practiced in social contexts and that even the school, however ‘artificial’ it may be accused of being in its ways of teaching reading and writing, is also a social construction [...] The notion is, in this sense, also profound in that it has significant implications for our understanding and definition of what counts as literacy as well as for how reading and writing are taught (Street 1999, p. 37). David Barton and Mary Hamilton referred to Street’s concept, distinguishing the following features of literacy as a social practice:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historically situated.
- Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making (Barton, Hamilton 2000, p. 7).

The works of Brian Street, David Barton and Mary Hamilton (and especially ethnographical studies of Barton and Hamilton entitled: *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community* from 1998, treating literacy as an indication of unique activity of each individual) changed the perspective of research on functional illiteracy. First, literacy was placed in the social context assigning a crucial significance in creating interpersonal links and, consequently, social structures to it. Second, the social context has dominated the concept of children and adult literacy improvement: “The approach to literacy has, then, shifted from debates about phonics and whole language teaching methods to a greater focus on the social and the contextual aspects of literacy practices. These de-

bates about the meanings of literacy have implications both for the research and for educational policy and curriculum. Furthermore, they constitute an agenda for literacy work in the next decade or more that extends the debates described above with respect to the classification of the key concepts in the field, the analysis of the underlying assumptions and theories, and the development of practical applications” (Street 1999, p. 39).

## **2. Terminological establishments**

Functional illiteracy is one of social phenomena which cannot be easily empirically approached (Steuten, Korfkamp 2004, p. 30). Its definitions in the international discourse change depending on their contexts – scientific and research, political or practical – each time emphasising other aspects of the phenomenon. However, the researchers have not ceased to attempt to work out a precise definition of functional illiteracy because it is essential for estimating a number of people who do not have sufficient reading and writing skills to meet social requirements. But is it even possible to tell literate and illiterate persons apart when each person is confronted with other tasks, pursues individual goals by means of writing, has different needs and ambitions in relation to using the written word? According to the representatives of New Literacy Studies, great caution is advised when using “functional literacy” term as human interests and plans often do not match politicians’, teachers’ and test authors’ visions of what is functional. Things perceived as functional by some people do not necessarily have to be functional to others (Ivanic et al. 2004, p. 21). Difficulties with specifying the notion of “functional” are shown by the well-known example of a university teacher who has great knowledge but simultaneously incompetent when reading (with comprehension) a rent or lease agreement (Ivanic et al. 2004, p. 19). The researchers agree on the fact that “Qualitative determination of functional illiteracy puts numerous obstacles in our way. The fundamental issue is identification of a target group. What are its features? How can one distinguish it clearly? On this basis, one should offer operationalisation which would consider pre-established differentiation in detail and enable one to determine a target group qualitatively” (Schneider et al. 2008, p. 31).

Generally, the attempts of defining functional illiteracy made within the last several decades are basically based on two different theoretical and methodological approaches. One is of linguistic character. It focuses on analysing correctness of implementing principles defining the rules of producing correct written statements. On the other hand, researchers opting for the functional

approach, analyse a written language (and human competences related with mastering this language) from the perspective of communication potential of a statement and its significance in relation to creating interpersonal interactions and individuals' social activities (Kleint 2009, p. 39). The essence of the functional approach is a belief that a desired level of reading and writing skills is individually conditioned and dependent on a living and working environments as well as social relationships of individuals. Consequently, the functional approach questions the validity of establishing the general standards of literacy and the resulting definition of functional illiteracy (Nickel 2011, p. 5). Already the first international survey investigating citizens' reading and speaking skills, "International Adult Literacy Survey" (IALS), desisted from using the notion of "functional illiteracy" (OECD 1995). According to the OECD concept, individual's proper qualifications in a written language are determined by their compliance with the social and economic requirements (Tuijnman 1995, p. 29). Individual's dysfunctionality within the area of literacy, as an analytical category, can be considered only in the context of human social functioning. What is more, the research studies showed that illiteracy should not be perceived in terms of deficit; at most it should be seen from the angle of normative expectations of the knowledge society. Focusing on deficits favours neither a social perception of functional illiterates nor literacy improvement work (Wagner, Schneider 2008, p. 53). What is more, the researchers state: "The dichotomous term, "illiterates", is confusing even from the political perspective since it labels people and, consequently, discriminates against them despite the fact that they are often surprisingly effective in coping with reality even with their reading and spelling difficulties. Furthermore, the term suggests a total lack of competences while it is only about different deficits in reading and writing skills" (Brügelmann 2008, p. 33). Mary Hamilton cautions against dividing people according to literate and illiterate categories: "Categories are not only descriptive but normalising devices, defining not just what is, but what should be. Determining what or who counts as eligible to be a citizen or a literate person also shapes the flip side – not-citizens and illiterates whose characteristics and experiences are outside the classification system and therefore excluded. Their experience is deleted from the account and they are stigmatised as outsiders who do not meet the norm" (Hamilton 2012, p. 41). The postulate of abandoning the term "functional illiteracy" is being more and more clearly expressed in German literature on the subject. According to the researchers, its use seems to be justified only in the context of school education policy in the case of interests and demands of illiterate persons. In educational discourses and analyses, they

recommend using “people with reading and/or writing difficulties” expression (Grotlüschen, Riekmann 2012, p. 16; Nienkemper 2015, p. 25).

### **3. Causes of functional illiteracy**

The research studies concerning functional illiteracy offer a dominant conviction that its cause is deeply rooted in life stories of people suffering from this deficit (Romberg 1993, p. 32). Most often, it occurs as the result of a series of different unfavourable circumstances which are in part caused by fault of individuals (Nöller 2007, p. 28; Romberg 1993, p. 31). These are various „dysfunctional contexts“ promoted by „a depressing social and economic situation“ (Egloff 1997, p. 132). Numerous life story inquiries show impaired socialization of illiterates in family and school. Illiterate adults give accounts of domestic violence, alcohol abuse and parents’ unemployment or indifference to children and their education. Often, the parents who seldom used their writing skills themselves, did not make any efforts when school authorities reported problems. On the other hand, they willingly burdened their children with other responsibilities (e.g. taking care of younger siblings) which absorbed them completely. Typically, there were no books or newspapers in family homes. Neither there was a dialogue between parents and their children (Linde 2008, p. 139). On the other hand, other researchers state: „There is no clarity concerning the significance of parents’ education level in the context of functional illiteracy [...]. In most of the analysed cases, a functional illiterate is the only illiterate in his/her family. Undoubtedly, there is a relation between environmental affiliation and education; still, in the case of low level of literacy, there is no unequivocal relation (Wagner 2007, p. 104).

The research on school socialisation of illiterate adults indicates both individual barriers (lack of motivation and cognitive skills as well as proper socialisation in a family home) and objective hindrances (a large number of students in a class, low school attendance due to illness, changing schools frequently) (Oswald 1981). The researchers have found a relationship between functional illiteracy and disorders of cognition; especially, if they are in children coming from poor environments (Eme 2011, Greenberg et al. 1997, Greenberg, Ehri 2002). Neurological disorders have been also considered (Korte 2007, pp. 66–68). Learning difficulties lead to discouragement, fear of school and turning away from learning. Simultaneously, they confirm students in their conviction concerning a lack of intellectual predispositions enabling them to meet teachers’ requirements. Educators’ interventions, repeating school or transferring a stu-

dent to a special school do not bring positive results. On the contrary, they intensify negative self-assessment and discourage students to eliminate the reading and writing deficit (Egloff 2007; Schleiffer 2005, p. 339). The combination of three factors: family situation, individual conditions and school requirements creates a barrier blighting students' chances for building a successful „learning history“ (Füssenich 1995, p. 129).

The research on the sources of functional illiteracy basically shows „five forms of poverty“ related to functional illiteracy. These are: economic poverty (growing up and living in poverty), social poverty (lack of assistance and understanding in a living environment), communication poverty (no discussions in a family), educational poverty (low teachers' competence, inability to support a student, deficit of programmes adequate to needs of students with low learning achievements) and political poverty (ineffective school and teacher vocational development and training system reforms, no effective political initiatives supporting children from socially disadvantaged environments) (Genuneit 1996, p. 5; Przybylska, 2014, p. 299; Przybylska, Nuissl, 2015, p. 95). As the life story inquiries show, not all illiterate adults have negative childhood experiences related to a family or school (Klaus et al. 2011). Anyways, numerous studies have shown that „there is no typical way to illiteracy“ (Nuissl, 1999, p. 551). However, one may distinguish groups of people whose illiteracy results from the specific conditions:

- Adults who have fallen behind in school due to a lack of an appropriate educational offer;
- Adults who did not learn how to read and write in childhood due to a difficult life situation;
- Adults who – despite their ability to learn how to read and write – have not overcome psychoorganic disorders hindering learning;
- Adults who have lost reading and writing skills over the years;
- Adults with a migration background who were not fluent enough in a language of the country of residence during their school education to learn how to read and write (Egloff et al. 2011, p. 15).

#### **4. Illiteracy effects**

The researchers show a far-reaching agreement on the fact that modern illiteracy is not simply a matter of “a lack of skills”. The actual problem is that the deficit in communication in writing leads to long-term ”individuals” exclusion from a social life (Panagiotopoulou 2001, p. 62). The consequences of illiteracy



are quite broadly discussed in the literature on the subject, both in an individual and a cross-community dimension. The latter one most of all indicates economic costs of low qualifications, that is, burdening public budgets with unemployment benefits in connection to a lack of or low qualifications and losses in economy in the case of workers' competences unfitting its needs. What is more, a lack of participation of illiterates in the processes occurring in democratic societies is alarming and it is true especially in the case of their political passivity resulting from, among others, incomprehension of political party programs and refusal to participate in any form of citizenship education (Kronauer 1997, pp. 34–38). This part of societies which has been so far called „illiterate population“ is more and more often perceived as the „population of silent people“ (Panagiotopoulou 2001, p. 63) as they are confused and unable to express their opinions in social discussions. One may only presume that, in connection to growing popularity of conservative parties in the western societies, the issue of illiterates' susceptibility to populist catchwords will soon become a political and educational issue.

In the light of the research on the life situations of illiterate persons, these do not form a homogenous group. Functional illiterates have various ways of coping with everyday life and labour market challenge, different incomes, more or less satisfactory relationships with social environment, varied ambitions and plans. They are so diverse in every respect that the researchers do not even attempt to describe this population by gender (Buddelberg 2012, p. 193). However, an overview of the qualitative research studies, mostly based on respondents' self-reflection, enables one to notice certain specific regularities and events in life stories of illiterate persons. In their narratives, they often express fear of stigmatization, revealing their deficit sedulously hidden from partners and children, in social and working environment as well as losing their jobs due to a lack of or low reading and writing skills (Linde 2008, p. 108; Egloff 1997). They mention high emotional costs related to keeping their deficit a secret and low self-esteem resulting, among others, from „social condemnation“ (Nuisl, 1999, p. 539) of people who have not mastered a basic cultural technique. They develop different strategies that help them protect themselves from exposure. As the result, they keep having somebody doing their work, they are lying and manipulating. They live under constant strain which has an influence on their health (Döbert, 2009, p. 8). Stressful is visiting public offices and banks, receiving official mail, a parents-teacher meeting or physician consultation because there can always be a form to fill in. Their relationships are often based on dependence. They limit their social life to a closest circle

of friends not to be exposed to ridiculousness and scornful remarks (Linde, 2008, p. 120).

The above mentioned description only indicate certain problems occurring in everyday lives of functional illiterates; however, these cannot be applied to the whole population of illiterates. Many of them are doing quite well in the culture of the written word, effectively making up for their deficit with other talents and passions. Having learnt how to function with a reading and writing deficit, they become „experts“ in their life situation. Despite their inability to read and write, they participate, passively or actively, in culture. They may dictate texts, deliver speeches, listen to audiobooks, act in theatre.

Illiteracy discourses interweave; however, their overview enables one to formulate a thesis that the contemporary illiteracy carries „subjective multifaceted suffering and objective exclusion“ (Schlutz, 2007, p. 18). The suffering stems from a constant need of anonymity and a fear of stigmatization (Rombert, 1993, p. 15). The exclusion is confirmed by functional illiterates' silence within the public space and poverty which affects them much more painfully than literates, and condemning them to a life of social benefits and limiting chances for using cultural property and participating in a social life (Kamper, 1994, p. 633). Illiteracy, very often placing people at the bottom of social hierarchy and being a source of constant stress, requires a literacy improvement work which is, to a greater extent than other spheres of adult education, sensitive to exclusion mechanisms and able to furnish the participants in skills needed on their way to regaining control over life and emancipation.

## **5. Teaching and learning of adult illiterates**

The analyses of illiterates' teaching and learning processes have been arousing a keen interest of international educational environments for several decades now. There even have been opinions appearing that the image of functional illiterates created by the science is not entirely reliable since it is much more focused on recognising different aspects of social functioning and learning of people who have decided to take part in literacy trainings than on functional illiterates who do not come out in the public space for different reasons, staying in “self-isolation within the area deprived of culture and full of silence” (Giese, Gläß 1984, p. 29 et seq). According to the German Research studies, functional illiterates participate in continuing education less often than literates; in formal education – 9% (general population – 13%), extra-formal education – 28% (general population – 42%), non-for-

mal education – 15% (general population – 25%) (Grotlüschen, Riekmann, 2012, p. 258).

First German empirical studies concerning learning processes of adult illiterates, most of all, focused on recognising their individual learning strategies. These were scrutinized in order to work out proper methodology of literacy trainings. The principle of focusing an educational process according to participants' needs (Breloer et al. 1980; Tietgens 2001) and the principle of respecting their subjectivity started to be in a limelight. To a great extent, this approach has been popularised by the studies conducted within the milieu of psychologist Klaus Holzkamp (Faulstich, Ludwig 2004).

Numerous narrative interviews with participants of literacy trainings showed a strong connection between illiterates' attitude towards learning and life story experiences. Childhood memories concerning school failures, humiliation with regard to the reading and writing deficit in professional and personal lives, different life failures and fear of another failure accompany adult illiterates also when they are attempting to eliminate their deficit (Linde, 2008, p. 138). Together with recognition of great significance of "individual learning histories" in connection to subsequent attempts to learn how to read and write, the researchers turned to life story methods (Ludwig, 2012, p. 13). It is about supporting illiterates in "clearing the decks", learning by their own mistakes and understanding that not all life failures are the results of their own weakness. Besides, in many interviews, the participants of literacy trainings clearly distinguished between their own (insufficient) achievements in reading and writing and achievements in other domains. They often took pride in successes of their lives (Nuissl, 1999, p. 552). Contrary to the stereotyped believes, many of them feel satisfied with their achievements and do not identify with a "victim" role. "This is the way functional illiterates maintain relatively high self-esteem or develop it over years despite experienced and ongoing humiliating experiences... [...]. Some of the respondents presented themselves as people having professional careers and high social competences. Thanks to their spirit of enterprise and support of family and superiors they manage with planning a professional career and obtaining additional qualifications to make their plans come true – and all these happen before they even learn to read and write" (Egloff, 2007, p. 77).

The basic principle of literacy improvement work is referring to strengths of functional illiterate persons in the teaching - learning process. Hence the researchers' keen interest in functional illiterates' motivation to overcome illiteracy deficit in their adulthood. Most often, the research studies show the

following stimuli: losing or being afraid of losing one's job, being transferred to a position requiring the use of writing, a child starting a school and willingness to help him/her with doing homework, losing assistance of a person who has been replacing an illiterate in reading and writing (e.g. death, divorce) (Döbert, Hubertus, 2000, pp. 74–75). “Motives of the trainings’ participants are closely connected with their life story experiences of the past and requirements of the future. There are two basic motives most often mentioned in consultations: a desire of letting go of the fear, insecurity and sense of shame and a willingness to change one’s professional situation, its stabilisation and improvement” (Döbert, Hubertus, 2000, p. 132).

In order to be successful in teaching, teachers have to understand life situations of their adult students, recognize and appreciate their abilities, refer to their strengths. They have to encourage and, most of all, provide assistance with overcoming subsequent barriers. “Effective practice happens when teachers can successfully balance the conflicting demands arising from policy, management requirements and learners’ lives and goals. Managing a ‘classroom ecology’ where vulnerable people are gathered together requires personal teacher qualities as well as sound teaching strategies” (Howard, 2007, p. 37).

Many research projects of the past years concerned recognition of numerous aspects related to teaching of reading and writing which may be the sign of, among others, a growing demand for literacy improvement trainings and the existing progress within the area of methodology. As the result of the research works, there have been new literacy improvement programmes (cf. Bolzmann et al. 2015) or publications concerning diagnostics in literacy improvement (cf. Nienkemper 2015) published. Within the projects, there are international comparative studies and research works (among others, with Delphi method) with the literacy experts conducted in order to use their experience to design new concepts of working with illiterate persons (Affeldt et al. 2009, pp. 253–263).

As knowledge of the specific character of illiterates’ learning is increasing, there are more and more research projects aiming at working out a profile of competences of educators working within the area of literacy improvement (Löffler, 2007, pp. 114–117). There is a far-reaching agreement on the key competences in the international discourse. For instance, the model offered by the Austrian researcher includes the following components, specific for many other concepts: written language teaching theory; ability of diagnosing and planning a learning process taking aspects of everyday life and needs and interests of participants into consideration; competence concerning the recognition of participants’ potential, educational needs and goals; knowledge of methods

of literacy improvement work; competence of supporting learners' autonomy and communication skills; consultation competences, etc. (Doberer-Bey, 2007, pp. 111–112). Simultaneously, the literacy improvement which target group is extremely diverse, especially with regard to age and life and educational experiences, emphasizes the ability of reflective educational activity consisting in going beyond own experience through verifying it and gaining theoretical knowledge so that „knowing how“ turns into „knowing that“ (Linde 2008, p. 183, after Dewe, 1996, p. 42).

## **6. Trends in research in illiteracy and literacy improvement**

The output of research on functional illiteracy is quite considerable; however it has left many questions unanswered. For instance, in the context of recognising causes and effects of illiteracy, there can be criticism heard in relation to a lack of reliable longitudinal studies. Besides, neither the results of cross-sectional studies which number is still growing, have satisfied the researchers since they mainly detect correlations which can be explained by means of a cause and effect interpretation in both directions – as a factor leading to illiteracy or its effect. They do not provide unequivocal statements concerning causality (e.g. when in a cross-sectional study, reading competence and professional success correlate) [Brügelmann, 2008, p. 36]. On the other hand, longitudinal studies also raise doubts (e.g. high reading competences at the age of 15 and great income at the age of 35 may result from parents' social and economic status) [p. 36]. The studies of British researchers, Samantha Parsons and John Bynner, from the end of the 50s and 70s are considered model ones in the international environment (cf. Parsons, Bynner 2005). Their studies included different age cohorts, indicating a number of relations (e.g. between education and social engagement) and life events specific for “Improvers”, “Non-Movers” and “Deterioraters” (Brügelmann, 2008, p. 32). They have considerably contributed to deepening of knowledge of causes and effects of functional illiteracy.

A specific feature of the contemporary research on illiteracy and literacy is the fact that they have abandoned perception of literacy in universal categories, questioning the validity of measuring a level of reading and writing skills by means of tests or other standard measuring instruments. Currently, literacy is treated as a phenomenon strictly related to the structure of societies and states. The main focus is on individual and local contexts as well as relations between literacy and authority, politics, religion, individual's emancipation, social participation and the economic development of the region where the illiterate lives

(Przybylska, 2014, p. 19). Literacy improvement is perceived in wide political and educational as well as theoretical contexts. The change of paradigm took place together with acknowledgement that reading and writing are not only techniques which should be mastered to communicate in writing but it is also a practice, deeply rooted in human actions and expressing these actions in everyday lives. Reading and writing are considered as a conscious cultural activity of an individual. Thus appeal to the researchers: We still, then, need to analyze and contest what counts as ‘literacy’ (and numeracy); what literacy events and practices mean to users in different cultural and social contexts – the original inspiration for NLS – but also what are the ‘limits of the local’; and, as the writers cited here indicate, how literacy relates to more general issues of social theory regarding textuality, figured worlds, identity and power” (Street 2003, pp. 87–88). The belief that literacy is only one of many conditions of individual’s active participation in a social life; one of the aspects which, depending on life conditions of an individual, may support him/her in getting satisfaction from life or have a negative influence on his/her development and life prosperity, has been increasingly often expressed. Does literacy definitely determine individual’s success or failure? Answer: not so very much, for the world is by and large structured in such a way that it is capable of absorbing the impact. But if the whole world consisted of literate, autonomous, critical constructive people, capable of translating ideas into action, individually or collectively – the world would change“ (Galtung, 1975, p. 93). Scepticism may mostly be observed in highly developed countries where university graduates are underemployed or forced to use economic migration. Nevertheless, the scientific thought referring to the significance of literacy balances between a restrictive and unconditional demand for every human to have reading and writing skills according to standards standing in a certain cultural space, and a trend treating reading and writing skills as abilities of „written language activity“ (Panagiotopoulou, 2001, p. 56), as a condition of meeting individual requirements of life determined by the performed social and professional roles.

Placing social contexts, worlds of human life in the centre of attention contributes to shifting the focuses of literacy improvement work. More and more often, „literacy improvement“ is replaced with an „adult primary education“ phrase. It is not only about people mastering reading and writing skills but also about them having an ability of „written language activity“ in all areas significant to their social functioning. Hence Health Literacy, Food Literacy, Political Literacy or Financial Literacy (Mania, Tröster, 2015, p. 9). Literacy improvement constitutes only a part of adult primary education understood as a domain of

education subject to rapid transformations due to social, cultural and technological changes influencing the shape of human life. Building concepts and programmes of broadly taken adult primary education is a considerable scientific and research challenge when one takes the principle of orientation according to the life needs of education participants seriously.

The ability to read and write takes on a new light in connection to a growing popularity of the lifelong learning concept: it is perceived as an essential condition of human educational activity at every stage of life. The researchers emphasize the relation between „development of the written language competence and learning competence“ (Romberg, 1993., p. 27). Implementation of political and educational postulates and visions of lifelong learning societies seems to be hardly probable with such a great number of functional illiterates living in the countries of prosperous West. On the other hand, writing as a medium has growing competition in form of images and symbolic exemplifications. The so-called iconic turn (Wulf, Zirfas, 2005) occupies sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers and representatives of other sciences. It is also challenging to the researchers of the functional illiteracy phenomenon. A carrier of knowledge in times before the era of writing was an image. Wall paintings, mosaics, icons, sacral architecture, sculpture or theatrical performances and rituals promoted the system of beliefs and practices, being people's lodestars. Using image as a medium of knowledge and communication both in literacy improvement work and lifelong learning processes opens new theoretical and research doors before education and creates unique chances for development of educational practice.

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