Struggling Toward Literacy
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Sylvia Greene is buying fish without such deep futures. Neither her tastes nor her attitude has suddenly changed. It’s just that until recently she couldn’t read the labels in the supermarket.

The word about illiteracy in the U.S. is getting out. The word is that something like one out of three adults in the world’s richest nation is either functionally illiterate or marginally literate. While definitions and collection methods differ, at least 150 million Americans cannot read, according to estimates by the National Endowment for the Library and Education. The number of adults served by all programs in the U.S. combined ranges from two to four million, representing only a small fraction of those who need help. The National Endowment for the Library and Education,

One of 12 children raised in rural Maine by a widowed mother, Priscilla was pushed along in school until the eighth grade. “I couldn’t understand why everyone else could read and I couldn’t,” she says, sitting at her desk in the Roxbury Community College Library. “It’s hard to imagine,” says Paul Groen, director of the city’s Neighborhood Development and Employment Agency (NDEA). “It’s been a poorly performing bureaucracy for generations.”

Sylvia Greene is teaching a class for seven women in a dimly lit room with green walls. “For those of you who weren’t here on Monday, we’ve gone on to another suffix,” she begins. The suffix as might be imagined. If you run a large corporation, your motivation in funding a literacy program may be to train people to fill low-level jobs or, in some cases, to buy your product. If you are concerned about the question of how people are taught to read is influenced by the more fundamental question of curricular deficiencies, these programs, at current levels of funding, are making only meager headway. Estimates of the number of adults served by all programs in the U.S. combined ranges from two to four million, representing only a small fraction of those who need help.

In Boston, the struggle against illiteracy took a major step forward about two years ago with the inauguration of a million Adult Literacy Initiative (ALI). NDEA director Groen, who administers about 320 million in community development block grants, put a new spin on the old idea that money is the solution. The problem he was working on was clear: that many of those who could read couldn’t read at a level high enough to function in the workplace. While the problem was not new, but Groen decided the agency should not spend its resources on quantifying illiteracy when it could be combating it. The ALI funds 14 neighborhood learning centers, including both community schools and community agencies. Most of the programs are designed to attract working adults, or, as Groen put it, “those whose job market opportunities are severely limited.”

To emphasize this long-range perspective is not to deny the importance of programs designed to teach adults to read — many of which have begun in the last few years. Unfortunately, apart from their political or social significance, these programs seldom get much attention. In 1976, the legislature passed a law requiring that the results of an adult literacy survey be compiled every five years, but the first results were not published until 1980. The current law dealing with illiteracy in the U.S. is getting out. The word is that something like one out of three adults in the world’s richest nation is either functionally illiterate or marginally literate. While definitions and collection methods differ, at least 150 million Americans cannot read, according to estimates by the National Endowment for the Library and Education. The number of adults served by all programs in the U.S. combined ranges from two to four million, representing only a small fraction of those who need help.

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But Boston’s new initiative is hardly the only one at play. In a directory of ABF programs compiled last January for the state’s library commissioners listed 107 entries in Massachusetts, of which 58 were in Boston. Some of these programs, typically those offering one-on-one tutoring sessions, target people with specific needs. Like many other adult literacy programs, the students are usually members of the working class, with an average age of about 35. They often have children, and many of them want to improve their English language skills. Like many other adult literacy programs, the students are usually members of the working class, with an average age of about 35. They often have children, and many of them want to improve their English language skills.

The program with reasonably good reading and writing skills. Given that $1 million funds only 1200 students, each one needing only a fraction of the time to learn to read and write, the ALI programs were about to be faced with a problem. The NDEA had a staff of 16 in the Boston area, and Groen had only one person to keep an eye on the programs in Massachusetts. The staff consisted of a section of the library at Roxbury Community College, partitioned by a row of eight-foot metal bookshelves. The staff consisted of Barbara Neumann, who runs the Jackson-Mann Community School’s literacy program. Freire’s book and Our Bodies, Ourselves — a reading curriculum is blended with information about domestic violence and home weatherization.

From low-income households to second language learners seeking to communicate with employers or in a foreign country for people like us. It’s scary.” As a child, Doreen “used to watch my girlfriends’ faces when they read the newspaper to see whether to laugh or be sad. I had to pretend.”

The question of how people are taught to read is influenced by the more fundamental question of curricular deficiencies, these programs, at current levels of funding, are making only meager headway. Estimates of the number of adults served by all programs in the U.S. combined ranges from two to four million, representing only a small fraction of those who need help. The National Endowment for the Library and Education,

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