

Free but not able?

Literacy is the fundamental building block for any society of free speech, evidenced not just in grand statistics but in the lives of those most in need. Dominic Burbidge reports.



I first met Emmanuel when he was a kid on a sun beaten street of Mwanza City, Tanzania. He was the foster son of a market seller I had interviewed and had been following me secretly since I left the centre of town. When he chose his moment to tap my shoulder I found him distressed, on the point of tears, asking for help so he could go to school. To avoid the commotion I led him into a small café and asked him who he was.

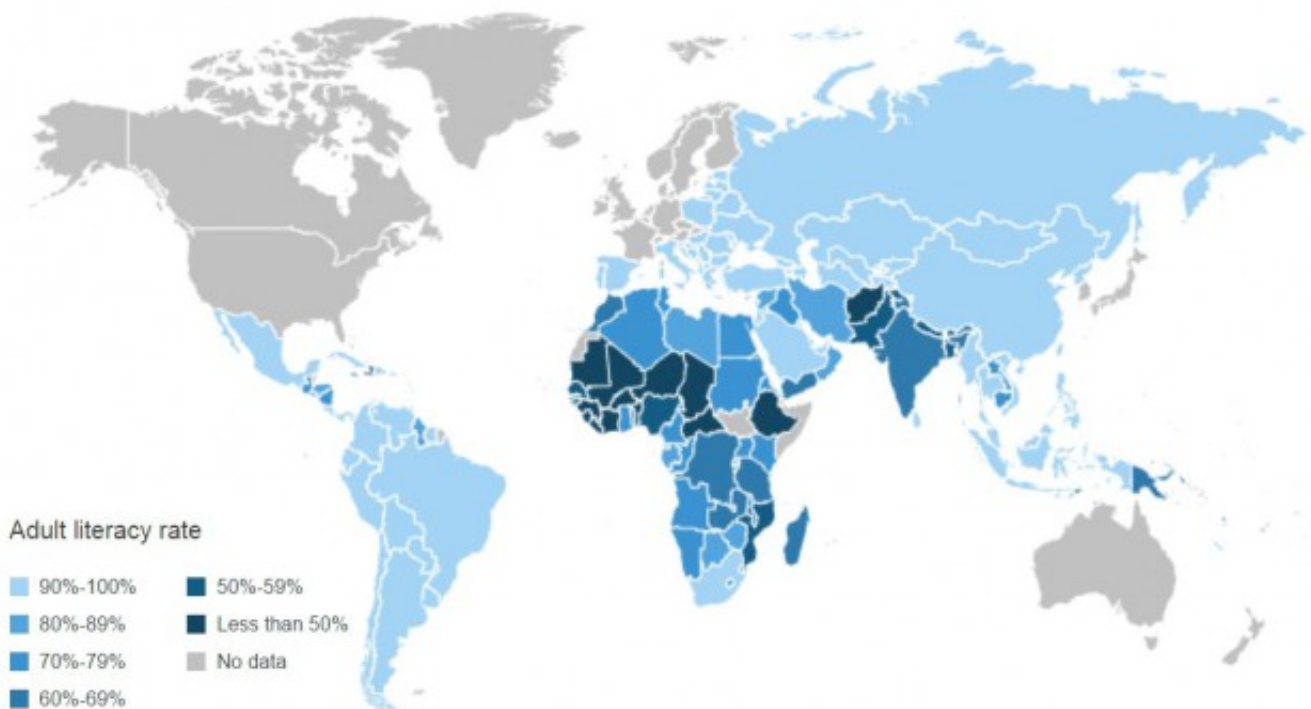
The eldest of eight children and from a village near Musoma, his father passed away when he was still young. Two years before I met him, Emmanuel's mother had died from a leg infection, leaving him in charge of seven other siblings. As the leader of the family he had travelled with the second eldest, Jackson, to find some way of bettering themselves in the larger city of Mwanza, hoping to return with a means of supporting the others who were now with extended family. After moving to and fro between different street groups and makeshift friendship networks, the two boys had found support from a Christian lady called Margaret who lived among the rocks of Mwanza's northern

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suburbs. Margaret was a single-mother supporting two of her own daughters and, though she had no space to put up the boys, she struck a deal with an old man living close by so that the boys could sleep on his floor so long as she was the one who provided their food. Shelter and food had been found; Emmanuel was following me because he wanted an education. In response I organised the paying of his school tuition fees over four years, which cost me a total of about £100.

Tanzania has a literacy rate of 65 per cent, which means that, according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 35 per cent of Tanzanians “cannot with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on [their] everyday life.” This is the criterion [established in 1958](#) for determining whether a person is literate or not, with country-level data provided on this basis with the help of censuses and surveys. Recent studies of literacy in developed countries, for example in the [US](#) and [UK](#), have further identified areas of illiteracy using stricter definitions, such as whether a person is above the level expected of an 11 year old educated reader, but the threshold for analysing literacy in the developing world remains whether one is able to read and write a short simple sentence. Under this minimalist definition, 16 per cent of the world’s population is nevertheless illiterate, with as many as two thirds of these illiterate adults [found in the eight countries](#) of Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria and Pakistan.



UNESCO world map of adult literacy (2013)

The extent of illiteracy is a challenge to any advocates of free speech. The challenge hits us well before the questions of what speech should be counted as illegal or dangerous. An illiterate society has speakers who cannot write, and listeners who cannot read. They are cut off from debate as if

locked in a room of their own.

In his book *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen considers development as a process inextricable from the emancipation of persons through health and education. Literacy, he considers, is something not just beneficial for certain types of work, but something necessary for being free and able to see one's aspirations fulfilled more generally, whether they be economic, social or political in nature. The largest black hole to literacy comes in the education of women, with illiteracy hitting 9 per cent more of the world's females than males. Sen demonstrates how female literacy is correlated with fewer babies dying young, showing how important the ability to read and write is for the standard of living of families and the productivity of economies across the globe. But over and above these questions of life expectancy and economic productivity, we know that communication and the ability to read and write chime with a fundamental part of what it is to be human.

Ever since I explained to Emmanuel my interest in urban Africa, he has wanted to write me an account of his views of Mwanza and what must be done to stop the problem of street children. In 2013 I had the pleasure of visiting the flat of an Asian immigrant to the UK called Raj, who had by chance met Emmanuel when visiting his own extended family in Mwanza. Emmanuel was finishing school and gave Raj my phone number, encouraging Raj as much as possible to meet me back in the UK. Sitting on Raj's sofa in an estate in south London, I was passed a thick set of papers: "What brings about the problem of street children", by Emmanuel. Literate and educated, Emmanuel now runs his own business in Mwanza and has been elected ward representative of his neighbourhood.

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Published on:December 10, 2012