

## SUFFRAGE AND LITERACY

The literacy work of the public primary schools has been going on during the last 65 years with a brief partial interruption for about three years during the Japanese military occupation of our country. This task is expected to produce functional literacy for the young who finish four years of schooling from age 7 to 11. On this basis, available statistics give us the following figures: In the academic year 1956-57, out of a total fourth grade enrollment of 552,641 children, 66.13 per cent succeeded in finishing four years of primary education. In 1960-61, out of a total fourth grade enrollment of 635,190 children, 71.12 per cent managed to survive. This figure represent a record of improvement not, however, very impressive as it covers a period of three years. Retention of literacy after four years in primary school may perhaps be considered high if reading materials are made available to those who leave school after that grade. The problem then is to prevent dropouts as much as possible before school children reach the fourth grade if we expect to produce a marked increase of the literacy rate through the work of our public primary schools.

Adult education appears essential and even indispensable to save dropouts from completely reverting to illiteracy. At the adult stage people apparently need less time and effort to train when they could undergo an effective system of adult instruction. The experience of principals of Denmark's folk schools or people's colleges shows that "the same amount of information which it takes the half-grown youth dozing on school forms (grades) three to five years to learn, can be acquired by

adults who are keen on learning and who have done practical work, in the space of three to five months." Given the proper motivation and having properly trained teachers, I have no doubt that the same encouraging results could be expected with our own adults.

In this connection instruction on how to organize and operate folk schools should receive serious attention. According to a recent estimate about 70 per cent of Filipino youth of school age are out of school. Many of them are dropouts who cannot return to the public primary school because they are overage for their grade level. They naturally need training in adult schools. But there are only 21 folk schools in all, scattered over 14 provinces in our country. These should be the type of schools that could give the literacy training they need. There might be others promoted by private agencies, both secular and religious. The successful record of similar schools in the Scandinavian countries in improving the lot of the masses and in the intelligent exercise of civic rights and duties has attracted the admiration of many nations and has consequently influenced them in adopting a like system. The establishment of many more folk schools in every Philippine municipality should be envisaged as an essential part of our literacy campaign.

The existence of numerous private colleges in our country could be utilized for this purpose. With assistance of the Bureau of Private Schools, the cooperation of these private institutions could be invited and by permitting them to give credit to their students and teachers who receive the necessary training for organizing folk schools and learning the proper methods of teaching literacy to adults, considerable progress may be expected in advancing literacy or adult education among our fast-growing population.

In our search for motivation for adult education in our country we should not overlook one highly effective means, which should be tied up with the fantastic eagerness of the vast majority of our people in politics. For almost every elective office there are five or twenty five candidates for the position. They are all searching eagerly for voters, appealing to them, recruiting them, and even manufacturing them. In fact, some candidates and parties have gone to the extent of transforming bees, birds, and fishes into qualified voters.

Let us stop for a moment and look up the law which defines the qualifications of voters. We find it in our National Constitution which says: "Suffrage may be exercised by male citizens of the Philippines not otherwise disqualified by law, who are twenty-one years of age or over and are able to *read and write*, and who shall have resided in the Philippines for one year and in the municipality wherein they propose to vote for at least six months preceding the election." This right was later extended by a plebiscite to women as provided in the Constitution.

These qualifications have definite purposes. Citizenship places in the hands of the Filipino the sole power to decide how his country and his people should be governed. The age of twenty-one is chosen as the starting point of maturity when a person could be relied upon to exercise his judgment and discretion in deciding who should be intrusted to run the government ably and responsibly. The residence requirement enables the voter to acquaint himself with the conditions and needs of his country and his community. And the required ability "*to read and write*" envisages a voter who has that degree of education which would enable him to personally inform himself about the issues and

problems involved in elections. For he is expected to cast his vote wisely and prudently in the light of what he understands from what he reads about the candidates and the election issues published in their propaganda sheets or in the newspapers.

Hence the constitutional requirement that a voter must know how to read and write implies very much more than mere ability to identify words and figures. It implies the possession of at least a basic education embodied in the concept of functional literacy, for which the Constitution provides he should have when it says in mandatory terms that the Government "shall provide at least free public primary education and *citizenship training to adult citizens.*" How to vote does not merely involve the mechanical act of filling a ballot. It requires the use of personal judgment on election issues and the merits of candidates. When a voter does not have that ability, there can be no free and clean elections.

One does not need to be a keen and perceptive observer of Philippine elections to notice that this educational qualification is neither strictly fulfilled nor faithfully required by our election officials. It is erroneously taken for granted. The constitutional mandate is clear and its purpose is obvious. The neglect it has suffered has lowered the quality of the government of the country. This condition could be changed and improved if the registration of voters is used as an occasion for an honest examination of the educational qualification of every person who wishes to exercise the sovereign right of deciding who should be intrusted with the serious and difficult power to govern his country and people.

The popular inclination towards political participation is a healthy sign of our people's interest in and love for democracy and democratic practices. But it has to be sublimated by an intelligent interpretation and strict enforcement of the educational qualification prescribed by our Constitution. If this is done, we will undoubtedly experience a development of literacy and adult education which would place our nation on the same cultural, political, and social level as that of the more progressive nations on earth.

Schools, teachers, volunteer workers, study groups, and reading and other materials are essential in the work of advancing literacy in this country or any other country. But the successful implementation of a major program of this nature can only take place under an adequate and effective organization. Assuming the availability of sufficient funds for this indispensable enterprise, its careful utilization depends upon a competent and responsible direction. It is the factor greatly needed to enlist the sympathetic cooperation of all civic-minded men and women of the nation without which the task becomes doubly difficult. — V. G. S.