Championing Literacy Around the Globe

Highlights from the World Literacy Summit

BETSY DIAMANT-COHEN

Caroline Simuchimba and Betsy Diamant-Cohen posing together at the entrance to Examination Hall.

In April, 2023, I attended the three-day World Literacy Summit at Oxford University in England. Sponsored by the World Literacy Foundation, the Summit brought together leaders from eighty-five countries representing over two-thirds of the world's population, all with a single focus—advocating, championing, and educating on the vital importance of improving literacy levels across the globe.

Presentations included topics of leadership in literacy, new technologies/innovation, literacy programs and goals, funding/sustainable development, girls' literacy, First Nation/mother tongue literacy, learning disabilities, community-based interventions for literacy, early childhood/primary literacy, and more.

The first person I met was Caroline Simuchimba, the executive director of Children Inspired Evolution (CIE) in Zambia. Her organization works with low income communities that have vulnerable children with extremely low literacy levels. Children in these areas lack education partly due to lack of resources, lack of interest and also due to lack of reading materials. CIE's mission is to advocate for equal and inclusive access to education for vulnerable children, orphans, and children with disabilities while ensuring that no child suffers from neglect, violence, and abuse. CIE does awesome work, and Caroline is a real mover and shaker.

Summit presentations were given in rooms throughout the "Examination Hall," a building on Oxford's High Street. Speaking under portraits of old white men in university regalia in large rooms with muraled ceilings was a change from US conference centers!

My presentation was called Mother Goose on the Loose (MGOL): Making a Difference from the Earliest Years.

Starting with the development of early literacy programming in US libraries for babies from birth to age three, I introduced Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) and spoke about library programming as a vehicle for helping children build all kinds of skills in addition to language and literacy, including social and emotional skills and basic STEM skills. This was followed by examples of the many versions of Mother Goose now being used around the United States.

After a full day of presentations, some of the presenters reconvened at a local pub for an informal happy hour. Through informal conversations, I learned that in Zimbabwe, only 5% of primary school children are fluent in reading. It used to be much higher, but the literacy percentage has plummeted since the 1970s because of the political and economic crisis in the country. I had not realized that politics could have such a devastating effect on literacy levels. On a global level, literacy rates are staggeringly

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Regrouping inside the Sheldonian Theatre once the building had been deemed safe after a mid-morning bomb scare!

low, and except for the people at the summit, it seems that the efforts to increase literacy are inadequate and sporadic.

On the second day, the summit was moved to Sheldonian Theatre, where participants watched predetermined, scheduled presentations and awards given on a stage. We were welcomed by the summit organizers, learned more about the World Literacy Foundation and heard from featured speaker Frank Schulenburg, executive director of Wiki Education (Wikipedia).

A major topic was the World Literacy Award; the top papers were presented to us. They included "Embracing Diglossia in Early Literacy Education in Arabic" and "Co-creating Comprehension: How Child-Led, Localised Edutainment Is Using Mass Media to Improve Early Literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa." Following talks about technology innovations that pave the road to new methods and wider reach, and adult illiteracy and its impact on society, funders spoke with us about corporate/community partnerships that address illiteracy.

Professor Rana Dajane, founder of *We Love Reading,* gave a fascinating presentation that included a documentary film of Asmaa Rashed, a *We Love Reading* Ambassador who had undergone the We Love Reading training and brought together a group of teenage girls to read and share their thoughts about the books. "The Neighborhood Storyteller" was made in a refugee camp in Jordan; it was named Best Human Rights Film at the Toronto

International Women Film Festival and was the winner of the Women in Film Award 2022 by the Mountainfilm Festival (it can be viewed on YouTube at https://youtu.be/BadwsWxeoq0_).

The documentary follows Asmaa as she tries to convince the girls' fathers and husbands to allow them to attend a book club at her house rather than remain isolated in their own homes every day. Asmaa is very persuasive, and she succeeds in getting some girls from ages 12 to 16 to attend. We witness how the girls grow in their ability to express themselves and dream about a future due to their exposure to new ideas and conversations with one another.

Following the screening, we were introduced to the documentary director and her father. Professor Dajane as interpreted as we video chatted with Asmaa. Seeing the effect that reading and sharing thoughts about books had upon the lives of those girls was uplifting; we all left the theater even more convinced (if that was possible) of the value of literacy.

On the last day, I sat down with Kim Jocelyn Dickson, whose presentation on her book, *The Invisible Toolbox: The Power of Reading to your Child from Birth to Adolescence* (Mango, 2020), focused on the importance of the earliest years for giving children the essential skills they need to prepare them for meeting the world of school to the very best of their ability. She spoke about the importance of parent/child interaction from birth and specifically mentioned the value of nursery rhymes for building critical pre-reading skills and recognizing rhyming words. Her presentation had been just before mine, and it provided a great lead-in to my presentation on MGOL. Her eloquent explanation regarding the need for parents to read to their children, even in utero, (https://theinvisibletoolbox.org/your-baby-wants-to-hear-you/) supported the premise behind MGOL's Hatchlings program for expectant parents.

I read Dickson's book on the plane home, and while she encourages parents to talk, sing, read, and play with their children, she adds another essential on her list of practices for parents to use with children of all ages—cuddle. I believe that reading a book aloud to a child, along with a good cuddle, is a great recommendation, so we had lots to talk about.

Another fascinating presentation was by the Alif Laila Book Bus Society, part of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) in Pakistan. Their mobile libraries include not only vans, buses, and bikes but also camels, yaks, and rickshaws. It's a practical and marvelous way to reach unserved and underserved populations in remote areas.

Two teachers at St. John's Anglican College in Australia, Deborah Wilson and Ronnelle Sanders, spoke about noticing the lack of vocabulary and communication skills in their incoming kindergarten children and decided to do something about it. They created paper keys, color-coded by topics. Written on the keys were questions for parents to ask their children, and reminders to pause and wait for the answer. If relevant, there were prompts on how to continue the conversation. Reading levels jumped
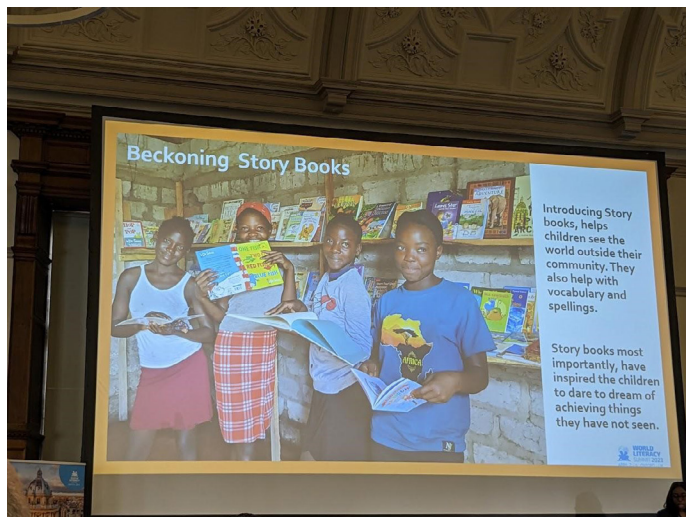
A slide from a presentation about Children Inspired Evolution (CIE) in Zambia.

after the introduction of the keys, and now the two teachers meet weekly to share other literacy expanding ideas.

Monica Figueroa's presentation started with her personal story of arriving in the United States with her parents as illegal immigrants from Mexico. The Texas preschool she attended did not have any books. When "confronted with a pile of books" in elementary school, she and the other immigrant children "simply flipped through the pages."

She wondered how those children reading books with the teacher could actually read them. Eventually, Monica got a reading tutor; twenty years later, her studying paid off and she became a teacher through Teach for America. She traveled back to her old preschool but realized that not much had changed.

"Kids were still struggling, parents were still confused, just as my parents were" because the teachers couldn't speak Spanish and the parents were struggling with English. Monica realized something had to change. She became a kindergarten teacher obsessed with making sure that every child would leave her classroom reading at grade level.

Not only did she meet that goal, but many students left reading at second grade level. Based on that success, Monica pursued a Masters in Entrepreneurship and Leadership at Harvard. Using her experiences as a struggling reader, and as a teacher of struggling readers, combined with what research says should be done, Monica developed Learning Momentos based on her interest in the neuroscience of reading, and the need for family engagement,

culturally relevant, and healing centered materials. Learning Momentos is "creating science based tools that support an adult's capacity to nurture a child's full well-being, laying the foundation to be healthy and happy in life" (https://www.learningmomentos.com/about-us).

After attending a session focused on helping students with dyslexia, I overheard the two presenters asking each other where they were from. Mark Stoddart was from Scotland, but Kate McElderry was from the Odyssey School in Maryland. I couldn't resist introducing myself as a fellow Marylander.

As she noticed my name tag, she said, "Taking my children to Mother Goose on the Loose programs at the Canton Library with Miss Gloria were some of our happiest childhood memories." What an unexpected but lovely end to the conference.

Upon returning home, I watched some of the recorded presentations. A track I was unable to see in person but enjoyed watching online was on youth-led programs. On film, I was introduced to Colin Bloom, the now sixteen-year-old founder of *Libraries for Literacy* in South Africa.

Colin is a dual US/South African citizen. He visited South Africa in 2018 when he was twelve. Walking down the aisle of a food store, he noticed that the packaged food had pictures rather than words on the labels. He asked his dad why, and his dad explained that many people in South Africa could not read. So, Colin decided to do something about it!

He researched literacy in South Africa and learned that only 8% of schools have a library,[1] compared to 95% in the US.[2] To raise money to fund a school library in South Africa, he started selling lemonade on the streets of New York with the tagline, "lemonade for literacy, and brownies for books." An avid soccer player, he would explain to people that "learning to read without books is the equivalent to learning to play soccer without a ball."

With the funds he raised, Colin bought books at library sales and found people eager to donate books. He was able to open his first school library in Soweto. Still a teenager, Colin has opened four libraries in South Africa. (To find out more about Libraries for Literacy, visit https://www.channelkindness.org/libraries-for-literacy/.)

These are just a few descriptions of the innovative projects supporting literacy around the world. To learn about more exciting projects, check out the summit website at https://www.worldliteracysummit.org/#DLIB. &

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