

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANISATION

Unesco Summer Seminar on Education
for International Understanding.

To What Extent is the World Literature used in School
as a Means of Promoting International Understanding?

(Questionnaire on Great Foreign Literary
Classics read in Schools).

Report of Group 3 LL - Area I. (Sofie Bryn, Rapporteur, Norway).

In August 1947, representatives from 31 nations were gathered together at Stèvres in France to discuss problems relating to international understanding through teaching.

Realising the importance of world literature as a medium for understanding between peoples and the unique opportunity provided by a gathering of this international character, it was decided to carry out the investigation described in the following pages.

The purpose of the investigation was:-

- (a) To compile a list of the most outstanding literary works of each country which, in their entirety or in excerpts, would be suitable as reading material for students aged 14 - 19 years, and which at the same time would in no way be detrimental to international understanding.
- (b) To discover to what extent this literature was known outside the countries of its origin, and whether this knowledge was evenly distributed to form a balanced picture.
- (c) Assuming that the picture was not balanced, to discover in which directions lay the main gaps and what was their significance.
- (d) To consider means of increasing this knowledge of literature and improving its distribution if necessary.

The method of procedure was to ask representatives from each nation to suggest a list A of 10 outstanding works of their own country, and a list B of not more than 25 of the works of other countries, which pupils aged 14 - 19 years in their schools might be expected to know.

47 replies were received, distributed as follows among the nations :

Anglo-Saxon group	11
Slavonic group	5
Latin-American group	6
Western Europe (not including Great Britain and Nordic group)	10
Nordic group	5
South Africa	1
Near East	4
Far East	5

The analysis of these answers revealed certain interesting and significant points. 254 literary works were suggested in answer to list A, the first part of the questionnaire. Of these no less than 193 (76%) were not mentioned in the second list and were therefore apparently unknown to pupils aged 14 - 19 in other countries. In particular it was notable that out of 22 works suggested by the Chinese representatives, only the writings of Confucius were read in schools outside China, while out of the 17 Indian authors listed only Tagore was known outside his own country. On the other hand, a large number of outstanding English and American authors were quoted by the Indian representatives as read in their schools, while Chinese pupils were found to be familiar with the literature of Great Britain, France, Russia, U.S.A., Norway, Spain and Italy. While India and China presented the most striking examples of countries whose literature was unknown to the rest of the world, it was noticeable that the literature of the British Dominions was seldom read by other countries, and there was little interchange between the Central European countries or between those of Latin America. Thus 9 authors were quoted by the Australian representatives, 12 by the Canadians, and 9 by the South Africans, none of whom were known to pupils of other nations. Similarly 10 out of 11 Polish works and 10 out of 11 Czechoslovakian works were unknown elsewhere, while 3 out of the 4 writers suggested by Venezuela, 2 out of the 3 suggested by Mexico and all 5 suggested by Bolivia were likewise unknown. Only 2 countries, France and Great Britain, presented lists of authors all of whom were studied in practically all countries.

The 188 literary works mentioned in list B, the second part of the questionnaire, were distributed as follows among the groups of nations:

Anglo-Saxon	81
Slavonic	11
Latin-America	10
Western Europe (not including Great Britain and Nordic group)	57
Nordic group	24
South Africa	1
Near East	-
Far East	4

Of the world's authors, 9 were outstanding in their widespread popularity:

Shakespeare (mentioned 30 times)
Goethe (23)
Molière (23)
Dickens (14)
Dumas (14)
Tolstoi (14)
Ibsen (13)
Hugo (12)
Schiller (12).

Apart from these 9, no author was mentioned a significant number of times except for Dante (9). There were of course 2 notable gaps in the answers received, as no representatives from Russia and Germany were present and there was therefore no evidence as to the extent to which pupils of these countries read foreign works. It is interesting, however, to note that of Russian writers, Tolstoi, Dostoievski, Pushkin, Chekhov and Gorki were read abroad, and that Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Heine, Hegel, Kant, Marx, Leibnitz, Schreiner, Mann and Zweig represented Germany in the lists. It should be noticed, however, that owing to a marked decrease in the study of German literature in certain countries after the war, the above picture is not truly representative today.

It goes without saying that the ancient Greek and Latin classics are widely studied, but they form a group by themselves and are not included in the statistics given above.

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It was not easy to collect accurate information as to the extent to which the literary works mentioned have been made available in good translations. It was fairly clear however that the barrier of language plays an important part in preventing knowledge of world literature from becoming widespread. Broadly speaking, it is true that books must be available either in English or French if they are to be widely studied. On the other hand, the ignorance in some parts of the world as regards the outstanding writings of other countries cannot be entirely ascribed to the lack of translations. It is significant that the outstanding works of India and China are mostly available in both these languages, but even so are not read by the Western countries. Indeed, the result of this investigation is as creditable to the countries of the Far East as it is discreditable to the Western nations. The picture presented is a very unbalanced one in many respects, but no part of it is as ill-balanced as that part which deals with the relation between East and West in the field of literature. Another significant feature to be noted is that the extent to which an author is known outside his own country is no measure of the quality of his writings; some of the most outstanding of the world's authors fail to cross national boundaries.

No elaborate claims can be made for an investigation conducted in such a short space of time with a comparatively small number of witnesses. But it is claimed that the evidence presented above has some significance, and it is suggested that the ill-balanced picture thus revealed has a moral and suggests the need for some action. The study of literature can clearly make a valuable contribution towards international understanding. Literature provides a window through which one can see the customs, needs and aspirations of other peoples, and its appeal to the aesthetic sense is something that transcends all frontiers. That it is possible to appreciate a good work of art even if that work has been produced by an artist of another race is admirably illustrated by the way in which Chinese and Indians appreciate Western art. The need for increasing knowledge of world literature is apparent. The possibility of appreciating world literature is no less apparent, and it remains to ask ourselves how one can best achieve a result which is so obviously desirable. Clearly no barrier of language must be allowed to hinder our purpose, and it would seem to be a task for which Unesco is peculiarly fitted to ensure that good translations of the world's outstanding books are available. This is something practical that Unesco can do. The rest of its task must be mainly advisory: it is to attempt to persuade educators in all countries so to adapt the curricula of their schools as to include greater emphasis on the study of literature, which can be so easily and usefully combined with the study of those countries from which the literature comes. Examples of promising practices in this field should be more readily available and the services of experts should be enlisted so as to ensure that the best advice is accessible to all those who are willing to use the world's literary sources as a means of fostering that understanding between nations without which the world cannot survive.

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The questionnaires giving the information asked for have been deposited with Unesco Secretariat (Literature Section, Mr. Kazantzakis) for further use or interpretation.