

# UNESCO's 50<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION <sup>1</sup>

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Fifty years ago saw the end of World War II — a horrific war waged against people because of their economic status, ethnicity, religious and political beliefs. Fifty years ago, the United Nations was created to help nations search for non-violent means to resolve their conflicts. UNESCO was established to promote education, scientific, and cultural activities worldwide. When the charter meetings were held in the United States and later in the United Kingdom to create the UN and UNESCO, respectively, teachers were part of the official delegations. Dr William Carr <sup>2</sup> served as the deputy to the chairperson and consultant to the committee responsible for writing the charter that created each.

Then, as now, the leaders of the world, including teachers and their representatives, did not ask what will the future be, instead they asked “What kind of future do we want and what are we willing to do to achieve it?”.

At the end of the Second World War, nations realized that education was critical to rebuilding their economies and stabilizing the political situations within their borders. Today, the need to underscore the critical role of education in nation building has never been greater. For example, there are 900,000,000 illiterate people in the world today; two-thirds of whom are women and girls. Yet, studies show that the education of the mother has a greater impact on the future of families than any other single factor.

When the uncapped potential of a student meets the liberating art of a teacher, a miracle unfolds. A special relationship is born. The relationship of teacher and pupil defies definition. But it can leave an indelible imprint. Each of us has had teachers who have made a lasting impression upon us. Many of us have had teachers who truly made a difference in our lives, who instilled in us the love of learning and the liberty that results from it. Teachers who had a decisive impact on their students and, thus, on the intellectual, cultural, social, political and economic development of their nation. Jacques Delors, head of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, captured it eloquently when he said “teaching is the noblest of professions.”

The special relationship I have described underscores the fact that education is the lifeblood of democracy and of national development. That lifeblood, that heart has never pulsed more strongly than it does today. Recent developments — in Eastern Europe and the former-Soviet union, the Middle East, many parts of Central and South America, Northern Ireland, and Africa — give substance to this claim. We see it every time a poem is written, a picture is painted, or a song is sung. We see it every time we turn on our television sets or our computers and communicate with people from different parts of the world, different cultures. We see it every time we board an airplane or a shuttle flies into space to explore the universe or a submarine explores the depths of the ocean. We see it every time there is a scientific breakthrough designed to improve the quality of

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<sup>1</sup> This text includes the broad lines of the speech made by the President of Education International (EI) at the official ceremony highlighting UNESCO's 50th Anniversary.

<sup>2</sup> It is with sadness that we learned the death of Dr Carr early March. His name will remain associated with the development of organizations such as the United Nations, UNESCO, National Education Association (NEA) and World Confederation of Organizations of the Teaching Profession (WCOTP).

life of people wherever they may live in this world. And, we will see it again when we find a cure for the deadly disease AIDS.

Today once again the leaders of the world are focusing their attention on education and on national and global development. Education has risen on the political agenda in many nations, driven by the awareness that a neglect of national school systems will have tremendous social and economic consequences. At a time when the world is in the midst of major transitions and changing national priorities, our unwavering priority should be to continue to develop quality educational opportunities, pre-school through graduate school, that will prepare people to live in a more complex, intercultural, technologically oriented world. As Plato said: "That which is honored in a country is that which is cultivated. Countries which honor education cultivate it."

Education International firmly believes that UNESCO should continue to be the lead agency in the UN system for the cultivation and expansion of education. UNESCO must continue to provide the critical leadership to bring leaders of governmental and non-governmental organizations together to work to ensure that all children have access to quality public education, education that is free and democratic.

To achieve this goal all nations must be part of the partnership to assure children that schools will be learning communities and to ensure that they inherit a world more humane and just than the one we live in today. Toward that end, it is time to resolve our political differences. It is time for the United Kingdom and the United States, my home country, to return to membership within UNESCO so that we can work together to realize that dream. Education International commends Dr Mayor for the monumental efforts he has made to eliminate the sources of criticism which have been leveled against UNESCO. We believe that significant strides have been made and that it is time to work from within to resolve residual differences, if there are any. To remain outside is no longer valid nor wise.

Education International congratulates UNESCO for 50 years of outstanding service to the peoples of the world. More importantly, we are here to reaffirm our relationship with UNESCO to work to guarantee that by the time UNESCO celebrates its 100th Anniversary in 2045, we will have totally eradicated illiteracy from the face of the earth — to guarantee that every child, woman, and man will have the opportunity to become educated and, thus, to become liberated.

## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR



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