The United Nations defines illiteracy as the inability to read and write a simple message in any language. So how many people in the world can't read or write? Well, in 1957 a United Nations survey discovered that 44% of the world's population was illiterate. This was a huge and worrying number at the time, but later surveys showed that illiteracy rates fell after that. A 1978 study, for example, showed the illiteracy rate to have dropped to 32.5%. In 1990, a further study showed the illiteracy rate worldwide to have dropped to about 27%, and by 1998 it was at about 16%.

However, a study by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), published in 1998, predicted that worldwide illiteracy would increase again in the future. In 2000, a UNICEF study discovered that only a quarter of the world's children were at school. This is a potentially disastrous development, because if the number of children in schools across the world falls, illiteracy will start to increase once more.

 UNICEF is interested in building schools and training teachers around the world, because this is the best way to end illiteracy. And the war against illiteracy is an important one. The world's poorest people are usually illiterate.