

literacy

communicating international development research

Time to get serious about meeting the literacy challenge

Literacy is recognised as a human right and the foundation for all further learning. However, complacent policymakers keep nearly a fifth of the world's adult population on the sidelines of society and limit progress towards poverty reduction. Action is needed to increase programmes and encourage the relevant use of literacy.

The 2006 Education for All Global Monitoring Report focuses on literacy, one of the most neglected EFA goals. Governments and donors must recognise that literacy is crucial to the success of the EFA targets as well as to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Literacy policy should have the goal not only of literate individuals but also the broader one of literate societies, in which literacy contributes to economic growth. Literacy has wide-ranging benefits including critical thinking, improved health and family planning, HIV/AIDS prevention, children's education and active citizenship.

Governments typically spend only one percent of their national education budget on literacy programmes. Literacy educators are badly paid, lack job security and have few training opportunities. There is often a lack of learning materials. Most formal programmes only offer 300 to 400 hours of instruction over two years, although experience suggests the need for 600 hours in a shorter time frame.

The report shows that:

- Illiteracy is a gender issue: worldwide, only 88 adult women are considered literate for every 100 adult men, with much lower numbers in low income countries.
- Sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, and the Arab States, all have the lowest literacy rates of around only 60 percent, despite increases of more than 10 percent since 1990.
- Few aid agencies produce data on how much they spend on literacy.
- Regardless of learner motivation, regular attendance of literacy programmes decreases without public support.
- Meeting the 2015 goal of achieving a 50 percent increase in literacy rates depends on progress in the 12 countries where three quarters of those without literacy skills live.
- US\$26 billion is required in the next

decade for 550 million people to complete a literacy programme of 400 hours.

Few governments have long-term literacy policies focusing on programme design and delivery and resources. Individuals must be encouraged to become, and remain, literate.

The report calls for:

- governments to take responsibility for adult literacy policy with financing and frameworks to coordinate public, private and civil society provision
- adequate pay, professional status and training opportunities for literacy educators
- language, publishing and media policies to get reading materials into schools, homes and communities
- appreciation that initial learning in the mother tongue has psychological and pedagogical advantages
- programmes to ensure transition from learning opportunities in local to regional and official languages.

UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report Team
7, Place de Fontenay 75352 Paris 07 SP, France
T +33 1 45 68 17 06 F +33 1 45 68 56 52
efareport@unesco.org

Chapters eight and nine, in *Education for All: Global Monitoring Report 2006*, UNESCO, November 2005
www.efareport.unesco.org

Mexican literacy project reveals new methods of learning

Literacy should not be understood simply as learning the basic letters and sounds of a writing system but instead as the development of knowledge and use of written language in the social world. Developing learning opportunities must be based on local communicative and literacy practices.

A book from the UNESCO Institute for Education examines how a group of women living in Mixquic, outside Mexico City, have been using literacy skills in their daily lives.

As in other Latin American communities, many women in Mixquic have had little or no formal schooling and rarely go very far from their neighbourhood. They encounter reading and writing – either as observers or participants – in the community schools, churches, shops, library, news stands, post office and in their homes.

Unequal distribution of literacy is not as the result of individual will or capability.

Access to written material and access to opportunities to read and write are all related to power relations. In the community church many members are not provided with texts but are forced by a tradition of rote learning into dependence on others. Only recently has reading and writing been included in training received by children as they prepare for their first communion.

Education of adults who either never attended school or failed to complete primary education is filled with obstacles. Although most women in Mixquic already came across official documents they did not know how to read and write and were lacking in confidence. Trainers included:

- creating a friendly environment to minimise social distance between 'those who know' and 'those who do not'
- using reading aloud for groups to develop solidarity, help each other sound out unfamiliar words and overcome women's reluctance to ask for help
- recording their extensive knowledge of local plants and medicinal herbs
- commenting about novels and drawing comparisons with their own lives
- reading and discussing election campaign materials
- encouraging women to revise each

other's writing and only in case of difficulties to approach trainers.

Adult education will continue to be of little value without adequate funding and political will. In order to open spaces for learning literacy, educators need to:

- realise that the physical presence of written materials is not, on its own, enough to provide a written culture
- understand cultural expectations about who reads and writes and how and when
- study the learning patterns of individuals and how they learn literacy
- regard literacy as a central development of human culture, not just the mechanical ability to read and write
- take advantage of contact between generations when designing education programmes – particularly the ways mothers and daughters, grandmothers and granddaughters share time together.

Judy Kalman
Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas,
Calzada de los Tenorios No. 235, Col. Granjas Coapa,
14330 México, D.F., México
T +52 55 50612800 F +52 55 56033957
jkalman@mail.cinvestav.mx

Discovering Literacy: Access Routes to Written Culture for a Group of Women in Mexico, UNESCO Institute for Education, by Judy Kalman, 2005

Literacy in South Africa and Namibia

What are the difficulties of designing a literacy project based on the way learners use literacy in everyday life? Evidence from a literacy project in South Africa and from the National Literacy Programme in Namibia demonstrates that there are differences between learners' uses of literacy and their understanding of what it can offer them.

Literacy researchers have criticised the main model of literacy education for its narrow focus on income-related skills and school-based literacy. They suggest that literacy education needs to look at the range of literacy practices learners engage with in their everyday lives. The Older People's Literacy project (OPL) in Durban, South Africa was designed to be participatory, use adult-centred teaching methods and include producing learning materials by learners themselves. However, local concerns and priorities led to considerable changes in its design.

Research on the National Literacy Programme in Namibia (NLPN) also offers insight into the connection between reading

and writing in everyday life and the forms of literacy introduced into the classroom. The students in this study had little interest in the inclusion of everyday life literacy practices in their lessons. They expected a more formal educational setting and mainstream curriculum.

Why is this?

- Learners' own understanding of literacy comes from formal education, from which they have historically and politically been excluded. This exclusion is used to explain their continuing subordination.
- Literacy is associated less with functional everyday needs and more with the idea of being 'educated'. By attending a formal education setting, this gives participants a sense of pride and they feel more respected by their peers.
- Understanding bills and other everyday literacy tasks are less of a concern than the injustice of having to pay high costs for services and the struggle they face in settling bills.
- Trainers shared with learners an idea of formal schooling as the model for literacy programmes.

Both the NLPN and the OPL, despite being very different kinds of programmes, show similarities with regard to what learners and facilitators think about literacy, how they react to the classes and how they adapt them to suit their own needs and interests.

Far from being passive recipients of an approach imposed on them, trainers and learners actively change the content and format of the literacy programmes in order to suit their needs and priorities.

To enable programmes to adapt to the learners' needs, programme designers and curriculum developers need to understand:

- the symbolic roles literacy and education play in people's lives
- the particular social, historical and political context of the community that influences learners' perceptions of literacy and what they expect from classes
- power in terms of who possesses what literacy skills and what these skills allow people to do and feel
- relations of power between the designers of programmes and those who put them into practice.

Uta Papen

Department of Linguistics and English Language
Bowland College, Lancaster University,
Lancaster LA1 4YT, UK

T +44 (0)1524 593245 F +44 (0)152 843085
u.papen@lancaster.ac.uk

'Literacy and Development: What Works for Whom? Or, how Relevant is the Social Practice View of Literacy Education in Developing Countries?' *International Journal of Educational Development* 25 Vol 5.17, by Uta Papen, 2005

Supporting African women farmers

Many women in rural Africa are not only mothers and housekeepers, but farmers and foresters. These women are largely illiterate and cannot access most forestry reference materials. However, they can learn farming techniques from picture book manuals.

Women often play a central role in rural land management. However, in sub-Saharan Africa, 46 percent of women are illiterate, compared with 31 percent of men. This presents a challenge as trainers cannot rely on written resources to inform women about farming and forestry techniques.

Face-to-face training sessions, using posters and flip charts to convey messages, are an effective alternative for communicating new ideas. However, with no follow-up resources, women can feel uncertain about what they have learnt and lack the confidence to use new techniques.

There is a clear need for reference material to reinforce ideas developed during training sessions. For this reason, the UK Institute of Ecology and Resource Management developed a methodology for producing cheap and appropriate training manuals for illiterate farmers. This addresses target 4 of the UN Millennium Development Goals, which aims to 'eliminate gender disparity in... all levels of education no later than 2015'.

Researchers worked with 62 women farmers and a large number of field staff and development organisations in the Gambia. The process had several stages:

- Researchers consulted participants to identify subjects of particular interest. These were usually ideas they had seen or heard about, but were unsure of how to produce or develop themselves.
- Agroforestry was selected as a theme for developing the techniques, due to the interest shown in tree planting and farmland management.
- Many women were not used to seeing or interpreting illustrations. The researchers worked with the women to determine the type of drawings that would most clearly illustrate subjects.
- After developing pictures with the target group, artists produced a series of line drawings and office staff produced a copy of the manual using computers.
- The technique was then evaluated by local agencies and women farmers. The European Community has since funded a study to train staff from 12 organisations in Ghana and the Gambia to produce manuals on other subjects.

The project has been a success. Initially, 560 copies of the manual were distributed to farmers. The manual has helped women farmers to integrate tree planting into their farming practices. Women have learnt to plant and fertilise tree seedlings, use trees as fences and make products (such as jams and pancakes) from fruits and nuts. These techniques all increase the productivity of smallholdings.

Many more orders for the manual have since been taken from organisations around the world via the Illustrated Manuals for Development Projects (IMDP) website.

- The IMDP technique is used by an increasing number of organisations.
- The technique can produce training manuals on a wide range of subjects. New manuals produced by local groups can be downloaded free of charge from the IMDP site.

Rose Clarkson

IMDP, 11 Parkvale Place, Edinburgh EH6 8AT,
Scotland, UK
rose.clarkson@btinternet.com
www.imdp.org.uk

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id21
Institute of Development Studies
University of Sussex
Brighton, BN1 9RE UK
T +44 (0) 1273 678787
F +44 (0) 1273 877335
E id21@ids.ac.uk

 Institute of
Development Studies

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