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literacy

communicating international development research

Literacy pulls people out of poverty

At least 1.2 billion poor people cannot read or write. This restricts their ability to carry out every day activities such as read signposts, understand medicine labels and machinery instructions, confirm commercial transactions and avoid being cheated. Increasing the pool of literate and numerate people is essential to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

A briefing paper from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) looks at how literacy and poverty are connected. It highlights principles of good practice, examines potential for literacy initiatives and identifies challenges facing DFID as it gives greater priority to literacy as part of poverty reduction.

There is clear evidence that once adults take part in literacy schemes, the benefits can extend beyond the individuals. For example:
● participants are more likely to send their children to school, encourage them to attend regularly and monitor their progress
● the health and nutritional practices of their families may be improved
● participants take an informed interest in protecting the environment
● there is growth in community capacity, solidarity and a greater awareness of their rights as citizens.

Many adult literacy programmes have failed to produce expected outcomes and have had high drop-out, low enrolment and low completion rates. Programmes intended to suit all situations have particularly failed to engage with the needs, lifestyles and hopes of marginalised women. Literacy skills can help women to develop the confidence to participate more actively in public meetings, and play a more leading role in community affairs.

DFID provides examples of projects offering literacy assistance in response to people's expressed needs and aspirations:
● A project in Nigeria enables young garage workers to understand car manuals.
● In Bangladesh family literacy is assisting mothers to read to their children.
● Dual language literacy programmes in several African states are showing the importance of empowering those who may use different languages in different contexts such as reading religious texts and filling in official forms.

● In India professional lawyers have trained local facilitators to help women exercise their legal rights in cases of rape, property and marital disputes.
● Participants in credit schemes in Nepal have developed literacy, numeracy and book-keeping skills and are no longer dependent on a minority of better educated women.

Raising the development profile of literacy and providing programmes that are designed to meet individual needs requires:
● using the sustainable livelihoods approach to map where literacy practice fits into people's daily lives
● recognising that all literacy needs vary in an increasingly globalised world
● building on existing strengths of literacy and communication
● awareness that information needs, and therefore literary practices, are constantly changing
● better targeting, particularly of poor women who have missed out on primary schooling
● encouraging agencies to develop indicators to measure progress in reaching international literacy targets.

Literacy is more than an education matter – it is an issue that applies to all sectors of government. All Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers should therefore include programmes to develop basic adult literacy, with a particular focus on enabling women to play a more dynamic role in relation to the improvement of their livelihoods and those of their families and communities.

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Are literacy classes working for women in Mali?

Evidence shows the benefits of adult literacy for women in a variety of developing countries, but some argue that the results of adult literacy programmes are poor. Research from rural Mali suggests that involving women in literacy programmes does not necessarily improve their social and economic situation. Should development agencies therefore continue to assume that literacy programmes are always a good way to improve the lives of women?

The aim of the literacy programme studied in Mali was to increase the number of women and men who could administer development activities and correctly use the development materials. Despite the presence of women-only classes it was difficult for women to learn to read and write and those who did rarely used their skills.

The literacy classes did not succeed because there are only a few print materials in the community. Also, the classes are in the local language, Bambara, and uses for written Bambara are limited outside the village. However, unequal power and political forces also make it difficult for literacy to bring about social and economic changes in women's lives, including:

- The few women who use their literacy skills use them for specific purposes such as for work. However this was not covered by the literacy classes; rather the aim was to get women onto development committees.
- Men dominate the larger income-generating and development activities for which literacy is required and male community leaders pick men to participate.
- Men's classes take precedent. Women's classes were expected to take place after all domestic chores had been completed, at a late hour during which women generally relax and socialise. Classes were barely implemented during the year of study and learners had access to few resources.
- Women's attendance is dependent on whether they want to attend and on their husbands' permission. Sometimes women attend against their will.
- Many areas in which educators look for 'effects' of literacy fall outside the women's influence, for example the impact on children's education.

The community resisted changes in gender relations and so classes were promoted to members through highlighting the improvements they would make to women's traditional skills as wives and mothers.

Policy-makers need to recognise that for positive changes to occur, the entire social, political and economic context of the community needs to change. Literacy classes and female literacy learners may be unable to carry the entire burden for bringing about this alteration, particularly if the community opposes it.

Literacy learning needs to be developed out of real literacy tasks identified by learners, although this still puts the burden of change on women. Further recommendations include:

- determining through appropriate assessments what structural adjustments need to be made to make women's literacy successful and what other factors influence women's power in the community
- recognising that there may be better options for bringing about change for women other than literacy classes.

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Reflecting on literacy in El Salvador

Why are non-formal adult literacy projects often judged to be ineffective? Do providers of programmes understand the motivations and ambitions of adult learners? Defenders of the REFLECT approach to literacy may stress the principles advocated by Paulo Freire, but does this necessarily make them more sensitive to learners' feelings?

A research paper looking at El Salvador uses an ethnographic approach to explore how adult literacy students take strategic approaches to managing their lives. Challenging conventional assumptions that non-attendance in classes is indicative of lack of motivation or ability, it shows how adult learners engage with literacy as they try to relate it to their livelihoods.

The paper describes the literacy programmes of two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which have emerged from El Salvador's 'campesino' resistance movement against the dominant right-wing aristocracy. Popular education inspired by Paolo Freire was a major focus of the 'campesino' struggle during El Salvador's brutal civil war. The REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) approach to literacy continues to draw from the legacy of popular struggle and empowerment.

When locals expressed interest in literacy classes but failed to show up, the NGOs argued that the 'campesinos' were so oppressed by their condition that they could not recognise the value of literacy and they were blamed for lack of determination, ambition and cooperative spirit.

The research offers an alternative explanation. Just because women see literacy classes as a waste of time does not mean they do not value literacy. They have

> **Part of the reason for not attending literacy classes is that people have established methods of using relatives who are able to read and write**

defied stereotypes of the 'unlettered dumb campesino' by opening bank accounts, obtaining loans and becoming active in the local parent-school association. Their primary aim from literacy – the ability to sign one's name on official documents – has been achieved.

Part of the reason for not attending literacy classes is that people have established methods of using relatives who are able to read and write. The study also shows that:

- Lack of literacy is not necessarily a problem: of 21 community leaders in the area, only 4 can read and write yet they can work with government officials in ways that younger more educated community members cannot.
- Absence from literacy classes can be seen as part of resistance to dominant voices and moving away from left-wing language which many feel is no longer in tune with their aspirations.

The research has implications for the wider debate over the meaning of literacy. The study suggests the need to:

- shed the simplistic view of literacy as power – a separator of the empowered from the dispossessed
- realise that it is poverty, not illiteracy, which is the primary cause for people to be excluded
- ensure that participatory approaches to literacy do more to recognise people's livelihood strategies and explore poor people's strategic approaches to pursuing their aims and aspirations.

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Moving in the right direction? Nomadic education in Ghana

Formal education rarely reaches pastoral communities. In African states, with significant numbers of pastoral and other nomadic groups, there are calls for education to cater for this sector – on political, environmental, economic and health-related grounds. There is considerable pressure for pastoral education to be institutionalised but could there be a non-formal and community-based alternative?

The Shepherd School Programme (SSP) has been providing non-formal education (NFE) in seven pastoral communities in northern Ghana since 1996. SSP was established by the non-governmental organisation ActionAid, and aims to provide basic education to children from isolated and marginalised communities, to equip them with basic literacy and numeracy skills and to provide a connection to the formal school system.

SSP can be considered as 'formal' education in terms of curriculum and daily school organisation. Pastoral children follow the same syllabus and are graded like other Ghanaian school children. What makes SSP different is that school schedules are flexible. SSP works with teachers and families to accommodate education needs with the changing requirements of communities for help with farming and shepherding. Due to high teacher turnover in northern Ghana, local members who have some secondary education have been recruited and are serving as facilitators. Unlike elsewhere in the country, the local language is used at the early stages of schooling.

Interviews with pupils, their families, teachers and local authorities show that:

> Its ability to make classroom lessons relevant to village life while supporting community values has attracted national interest

- SSP has given a second chance for children who are otherwise denied any opportunity to attend school.
- Parents previously worried about the safety of children walking long distances to school. They now are reassured by the location of SSP within their communities: time saved can be used productively.
- Collaborative learning among children, parents, teachers and facilitators has grown.
- Schooling is child-centred, including appropriate songs, folk tales and dramas.
- Health, sanitation and environmental protection messages are now being passed on by children to their families – this can be seen by greater uptake of immunisation and action to drain stagnant water to deter mosquitoes.
- SSP has promoted democratic processes and has enabled women and children to participate in community decision-making.

As a result of SSP, children are more confident, want to continue their education and to obtain professional qualifications and are less inclined to leave home just to seek menial work in southern Ghana. They are generally regarded as dutiful and respectful to community elders.

Typically in this region of Ghana, the survival of pastoralism is under threat from environmental degradation and population pressures. Parents who used to regard schooling as a threat to traditional values, now view education favourably.

SSP is now recognised as a suitable NFE best practice. Its ability to make classroom lessons relevant to village life while supporting community values has attracted national interest. In their challenge to meet the goal of Education for All, policy-makers need to re-examine notions of 'formal' and 'non-formal' education and promote all-inclusive learning.

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'Fostering educational participation in pastoral communities through non-formal education: the Ghanaian perspective', International Journal of Educational Development, 23 (6), by Obed Mfum-Mensah, November 2003
'Exploring the constraints affecting non-formal basic education programs: The Shepherd School program in Northern Ghana', In Focus Journal, 1 (3), by Obed Mfum-Mensah, 2003
www.escotet.org/infocus/home.htm

case study

Women's literacy programmes in Nepal

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched the Girls' and Women's Initiative to encourage advancements in women's and girls' education. This was based on strong evidence that girls who complete primary school do better socially and economically. A research programme supported by the initiative in the Terai region of Nepal attempts to find out if increasing women's literacy skills through non-formal, basic education improves women's situation socially and economically.

It investigates the impact of two integrated literacy programmes by examining changes for women in the following areas:
- literacy/education level
- health knowledge and practice
- participation in income-earning activities
- political awareness and participation
- community participation and
- children's education.

The results of the research were compared with studies of women who did not have literacy training. Women who undertook the programme:
- are more aware of health and reproductive issues, political affairs and the importance of children's education
- are more likely to participate in income-generating projects, political elections, their children's education and community activities
- have greater literacy skills.

Researchers also found that a number of factors increased the chances of women staying in the programme, such as being older and having taken part in previous programmes. However, for the women who are the primary group that the programmes are designed to serve, increasing financial and time costs mean that they are more likely to miss classes and eventually drop out.

Implications for policy include:
- placing greater emphasis on the importance of children's education, and the ways in which women can become involved in improving their children's education
- strengthening the connection with children's education by linking literacy programmes directly with formal schools, involving literacy class participants in Parent Teacher Associations, or in multi-generational programmes giving greater priority to income-earning activities.

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'A Longitudinal Study of the Effect of Integrated Literacy and Basic Education Programs on Women's Participation in Social and Economic Development in Nepal', Girls' and Women's Education Policy Research Activity, by Shirley Burchfield, Haiyan Hua, Dyuti Baral, and Valeria Rocha, 2002
www.worlded.org/asia/nepal/nepal_12_19_02.pdf

Universal literacy Essential for development?

Are 'literate' and 'illiterate' meaningless terms? How can we judge whether somebody has become 'literate'? Research examines the relationship between literacy and development and looks at what literacy programmes should try to teach and how should they be evaluated.

A booklet drawing on the UK's Uppingham Seminars in Development argues that most traditional adult literacy learning initiatives are built on a false model of literacy and have failed to help participants use new skills in their everyday lives. It calls for a new definition of being 'literate' and an end to the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to literacy.

Uncomfortable questions are asked: Is someone who can read a religious text or who can keep notes on customers and sales but can read nothing else 'literate'? Is 'universal literacy' a set of skills common to all people? Is there any evidence to support UNESCO's claim that literacy is essential for citizenship and human and social development? If we accept such a view, the study argues that we exclude 'illiterate' people from their own development and ignore the ways that adults learn from each other or from radio, television, films or even from fashion magazines. Adults should not wait to learn literacy skills before engaging in developmental tasks and those who do not attend classes should not be excluded.

By contrast, the 'literacy comes second' approach encourages participants to start with developmental activities – whether tree planting, slum improvement, water pump maintenance or community health projects. Literacy skills can be acquired through the literacy practices of the developmental activity undertaken. The research finds that:

- Becoming literate is not a direct path from illiterate to semi-literate to literate, but a messy process of acquiring skills without formal and consecutive learning.
- Funds are often wasted on literacy classes, many of whose 'successful' graduates are not actually using new skills.
- Some programmes are replacing a uniform programme with literacy suited to the context, offering skills related to the kind of group and the activity undertaken.
- In all societies there are several different kinds of literacy – religious, school-based or commercial.
- New initiatives are focusing on groups of mixed ages and abilities in which students are able to learn from each other. The author urges policy-makers to:
- increase diversity by using different materials and methods for different groups
- let learners choose the texts they wish to use and to create, and do not assume that these must be 'easy texts'
- strengthen post-literacy activities: investing in the literate community members and helping them to participate in increasingly effective literacy activities may be of greater benefit to non-literate people than programmes that will only help a few
- discourage donors from their dependence on formal quantified evaluations.

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useful websites

ProLiteracy Worldwide
www.proliteracy.org/about/index.asp

Eldis Literacy
www.eldis.org/education/literacy.htm

Literacy.org
www.literacy.org/

United Nations Literacy Decade 2003-2012
http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=5000&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

International Reading Association
www.reading.org/association/outreach/index.html

Women and Literacy Special Collection
www.womensliteracy.org/index.html

UNESCO Literacy in Africa
http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=31032&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

Literacy for Livelihoods - 2001 Conference and papers
www.livelihoods.org/post/lit1-postit.html

Literacy Resource Centre Network
www.accu.or.jp/litdbase/literacy/lrc/

Centre for Literacy in Primary Education
www.clpe.co.uk/

World Education
www.worlded.org/WEIInternet/

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