



Effective adult education

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Question

What has worked to improve adult literacy and numeracy in resource constrained settings?

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The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

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1. Overview

The most important element for successful adult literacy and numeracy learning is to take a people-centred approach. Literacy and numeracy teaching should be incorporated into subjects that are directly relevant and useful for participants. Ideally, learners would be consulted on their priorities and be involved in the planning and design of the programme and of educational materials. The most effective learning will happen when adults are actively engaged in the construction of their own knowledge. Inter-generational or family learning programmes is one possible approach which has seen success in being responsiveness to the needs and concerns of learners.

Skills development should be considered in combination with literacy and numeracy learning, an approach known as 'functional adult literacy'. This can be difficult to apply when standardised literacy programmes are sought, limiting the skills areas that can be incorporated. Two successful examples come from Afghanistan: literacy and numeracy learning within the teaching of poultry rearing; and using exercise books for police with activities relevant to their work. The functional adult literacy approach was found to be effective for women's income generating skills and empowerment in Uganda.

A UNESCO literacy prize winning programme, Kha ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign in South Africa, emphasises inclusion of those with special needs and disabilities. Experts designed materials for deaf and blind users. Mother tongue instruction is used. Local language learning is also highlighted in the literature as important for effective adult education, though this is more widely evidenced within research on learning for children¹.

A background paper for the 2016 Global Education Monitoring Report shows adult education to be complex and multifaceted with many conceptual confusions that need to be better understood (International Council for Adult Education, 2016)

This rapid review should be read alongside a considered response to the helpdesk question from the British Association for Literacy in Development in the appendix.

2. Learner-centred approach

The theme that came through the most strongly from the literature identified in this brief review was that successful adult learning comes when learning corresponds with the needs, interests and priorities of the learner. Flexibility in what is being learnt; when and how is recommended for best results (UNESCO, 2011). Oxfam's guide to planning, implementing, and delivering literacy initiatives identifies consideration of the needs and interests of participants as its first key principal for effective literacy interventions (McCaffery et al., 2007). UNESCO's guidelines on developing programmes for adult learners in Africa describe successful projects which consulted participants on their priorities and involved them in decision making at all stages of the programme cycle (Goboku & Lekoko, 2007). The closer programmes are aligned to this approach, the more benefits were found to be sustained over a longer-term. The theory of constructivism is referenced; effective learning is expected when learners are actively engaged in the construction of knowledge for themselves (ibid).

¹ <http://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/children-learn-better-their-mother-tongue>

This is also noted by in a UNESCO report as important in inter-generational learning (Hanemann et al., 2017). Family learning is described as family literacy and learning practices combining elements of primary education with adult and community education to enhance literacy and numeracy skills for both children and adults. Evidence is cited for the benefits of inter-generational learning with the success factors being responsiveness to the needs and concerns of learners; and committed strong partnerships.

Alongside alignment with learner priorities, literacy and numeracy programmes should also be aligned with local, regional, national and international policies (UNESCO, 2013; McCaffery et al., 2007).

3. Literacy and skills

Making learning responsive to learners' needs, in many cases, will require investment in building skills development. However, emphasis on the needs and interests of learners is still required. Rogers (2014) describes the 'functional literacy approach' which incorporates skills learning into literacy learning. The author notes the problem that only a limited number of skills areas can be included in standardised literacy programmes. The learner doesn't get to choose which area. Rogers distinguishes as different putting literacy into skills development which has not had much buy-in from participants. The difference between formal schooled literacy and varied everyday literacy is highlighted and transfer between classroom and workplace or community unlikely.

Some useful examples from Afghanistan are described (ibid). The Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan (ELA) teaches the skill of poultry rearing and the literacy and numeracy related to the skill. Records are kept on purchase and food stuffs; and the sales or consumption of produce.

UNESCO and the Japan International Cooperation Agency are running the programme: Literacy for Empowering the Afghanistan Police Programme. Exercise books are used with material relevant to police work such as reading sign boards, license plates, driving permits etc. A monthly magazine is produced for new literates (Robinson, 2012). The Community Empowerment Programme in Afghanistan combines literacy and numeracy learning with business and investment training (LCEP, 2011).

4. Community empowerment and local language learning

Another key principle for effective literacy highlighted in the Oxfam guidelines is the need for adult education programmes to address power and access (McCaffrey et al., 2007). Programmes should recognise linguistic diversity and cultural difference to support citizen empowerment, building skills for human rights and social justice (Alidou & Glanz, 2017). A UNESCO report (ibid.) describes successful case studies for improving adult literacy skills and languages. The key in these cases was to promote skills for purposes that matter to people who were excluded from education.

The functional adult literacy approach has been successful in the Lango region of Uganda (Akello et al., 2017). Women acquired knowledge and skills enabling them to participate in income generating activities and bringing out individual and collective agency.

Case Study: Kha ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign

In South Africa the Kha ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign was one of the UNESCO literacy prize² winners in 2016. It aims to empower socially disadvantaged adults paying particular attention to those with special needs and disabilities. Materials are adapted for deaf and blind users. It uses mother tongue instruction combining literacy and numeracy with life skills training. This is noted to contribute to preservation of South Africa's main languages and foster national cohesion (Hanemann & Scarpino, 2016). It is implemented across the entire country by the Department of Basic Education (DoBE). Subject themes include health (eg. HIV awareness, nutrition, sanitation), civic education (eg. human rights, conflict resolution, gender relations), environmental management, and income generation/livelihood development. The programme instructs English as a second language to assist learners with ordinary tasks such as filling in forms. A large body of community-based volunteer educators or facilitators, supervisors and coordinators were recruited and trained. Training was given on: adult-appropriate teaching-learning methods; class room management; how to use teaching modules to conduct lessons, as well as to moderate the learning process; and how to conduct the assessment activities in the Learner Assessment Portfolios (LAPS).

Learning materials were produced and professionally adapted for deaf and blind [audiences](#). As well as materials, learners are provided with stationery. Community-based learning centres ranging from basic structures to more established institutions. Facilitators also receive ongoing training, mentoring and support from skilled supervisors and coordinators, all of whom have postgraduate qualifications and substantial experience in community development work. Volunteers receive a small stipend provided that certain criteria are met. Public announcements and various networks are used to enrol learners. To teach reading, attention was paid to enhancing perceptual and visual literacy skills and introducing phoneme/graphemes systematically for each language. Materials attend to fluency at the same time promoting comprehension. Impact assessments are positive. Problems have arisen in reaching working adults and delayed or non-payment of volunteer stipends.

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