

Youth and adult literacy and education: a good practice analysis

by *Gianna Alessandra Sanchez Moretti, consultant*

Public policies for youth and adult literacy and education

The social, economic, scientific, technological and climate changes of recent decades challenge human development and education. Since education should equip individuals with the necessary tools to deal with these challenges, it is necessary that the content of what is being taught reflects the local context and the interest of the individual. Yet around 774 million young people and adults—two thirds of whom are women—cannot read or write (UNESCO-UIL 2014, 16).

Adult education (AE) must aim to motivate youth and adults to continue learning throughout their lives and equip them with the practical skills necessary for working in the labour market, or simply for them to acquire a sense of dignity and worth, in addition to enhancing the knowledge and skills acquired or lost throughout their lives, such as reading and writing. One of the principles of AE is to teach young people and adults through the use of specific and appropriate learning techniques, since they have different needs, interests, skills and learning capabilities from students of the proper school age for basic education.

Education, knowledge and the skills of reading, writing and numeracy that an individual acquires throughout life need a continuum of educational activities to strengthen, adapt and maintain them over time. However, initiatives to tackle illiteracy are not enough by themselves; they are dependent on and need the support of lifelong learning, even through adulthood. The effectiveness of a comprehensive strategy to universalise literacy also depends on preventive measures—for instance, initiatives to improve the education system overall.

The effectiveness of literacy and AE initiatives is relative and depends on many factors, including the local socio-economic reality, educators' competencies, students' responsibilities and motivations, engagement of politicians, society civil and other stakeholders, the quality and relevance of the content of the teaching material and evaluations, resource management, the level of technical coordination etc. However, there are general guidelines outlined by UNESCO in relation to what can be considered to be 'best practice' in literacy and/or AE policies.

In 2005 UNESCO launched the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) to accelerate the literacy process by 2015 in 35 countries with overall literacy rates below 50 per cent and/or with more than 10 million illiterate adults. The mid-term evaluation, which was conducted in nine countries between 2005 and 2010, featured a model to establish a more effective system for youth and adult literacy policies (Figure 1). This model can also be applied to AE.

In every country, there will be different actors that can contribute to youth and adult literacy and AE initiatives. These actors can act at different levels—central, regional and local—and represent ministries, agencies, non-governmental organisations, civil and/or religious society, the private sector etc. Therefore, it is necessary to have a focal point or a mediator to assume the leadership role. Ideally, this role should belong to the body responsible for education, such as the ministry and/or department of education.

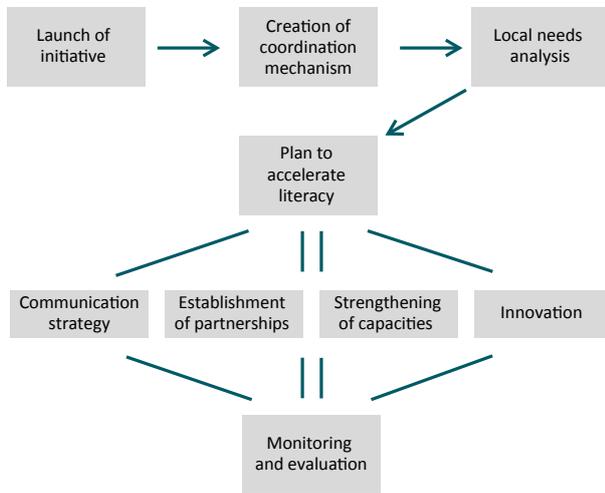
Coordination should be decentralised to reach the different realities present at the municipal, provincial and regional levels. Networks and mechanisms to support existing literacy and AE initiatives should be strengthened, and new actors should be included. Good practices in this area include the organisation of periodic meetings with the representation of all actors involved, or the creation of a forum, committee or working group, among others. The actors' roles and responsibilities should be well defined. Whatever the mechanism established, it is essential for it to be systemic, so that it is not affected by political changes over time.

A good communication strategy is needed to mobilise actors, partners, students and the community. The strategy should aim to raise awareness among politicians and stakeholders of the importance of literacy and continuing education. Good practices in this area include visual, television and radio campaigns, awareness-raising events, seminars, forums and workshops. A good time for such initiatives is, for example, the International Literacy Day, celebrated on every 8 September. Initiatives may increase student motivation and serve to maintain or increase demand for literacy initiatives.

Alongside the importance of having political engagement is the need to mobilise and establish partnerships. Examples of the LIFE initiative in Afghanistan and China show that the involvement of high-ranking political officials—such as presidents, ministers, governors and secretaries—

is essential to raise public awareness and mobilise partners in an effective manner (ibid., 21). The engagement of political authorities is important to mobilise, attract and maintain relevant partnerships.

FIGURE 1
Model to establish a more effective policy for youth and adult literacy



Source: Chu and Bajracharya (2011, 4).

The elaboration of a memorandum of understanding is a good way to establish and maintain partnerships. Memorandums can be stipulated with partners in education and/or related areas, such as social assistance, planning, home affairs, protection of women and children, health and statistics. In addition to signing a document to formalise the partnership, it is essential to have regular meetings with partners and stakeholders to discuss progress and bottlenecks, with the aim of improving activities.

Part of the process includes the strengthening of existing policies or developing new ones. It is, therefore, necessary to review the policy framework that gives structure to literacy and AE at the local level. These policies should be updated, reflect the new agenda and international norms and should set new goals and targets. This would serve as good guidance for the execution of activities. For example, policies in this area should reflect the concept of literacy and AE from a lifelong learning perspective and aim to foster an enabling environment for continuing education.

To strengthen such policies, in connection with the communication strategy, awareness-raising initiatives on the importance of literacy and AE must be carried out. It is also essential that the capacities of human resources working with the implementation of public policies be strengthened to reflect and implement the recommendations above—for example, through training activities or the elaboration of guidelines.

Closely linked to coordination and public policies is funding. The investment needed to universalise literacy needs to be calculated. The estimated amount would help facilitate planning. Investment must be managed transparently, efficiently and effectively. Communication campaigns and partnerships can also help raise funds for initiatives. It is crucial to have self-sufficient and sustainable financing mechanisms within the community.

Innovations regarding literacy and AE initiatives make all the difference to the success of public policies. There are no rules to innovation. It depends on the reality and creativity of local actors and the coordination team. However, there are environments conducive to fostering innovation; spaces where relevant stakeholders exchange ideas and experiences, such as meetings, seminars, debates and workshops. Research and the comparison and adaptation of practices applied elsewhere can also be useful to improve local literacy initiatives.

One can innovate in the type of literacy, depending on the local reality and needs. For example, the *Aksara Agar Berdaya* (AKRAB—Literacy Creates Power) programme in Indonesia supports the following literacy initiatives: entrepreneurial literacy, local cultural art literacy, folk literacy, literacy for peace, family literacy, community reading etc. In addition, specific programmes may achieve more concrete results. For example, in Nepal, literacy teachers are mostly women and teach classes for women, who are usually the majority. The results showed that the literacy rate among women rose three times faster than among men (ibid., 43).

It is worth mentioning that illiteracy is predominantly female in 81 of 146 countries, according to data from 2005–2010 (UNESCO-UIL 2013, 7). In many countries, women are considered a vulnerable group, since women and girls can more easily be victims of violence, human rights violations, limited opportunities etc. Therefore, there are specific programmes to empower them to contribute to their own development and their communities, especially through education.

The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is an important innovation that has demonstrated success, and is generally regarded as a productive support tool to facilitate, stimulate and improve learning processes in- and outside the classroom. Results of a randomised evaluation of an AE programme in Niger suggest that ICTs can be used to improve AE results among rural populations (Aker et al. 2012, 94–120).

Another tip is the development and maintenance of virtual educational tools for students and teachers. Results of a case study on the implementation of the *Programa Escola Zé Peão* (PALMA—Literacy Programme in Mother Tongue) in João Pessoa, Brazil, showed that the use of the PALMA application (a cost-effective tool) supported the literacy process in- and outside the classroom (UNITWIN 2015, 19).

Another type of innovation is the opening and maintenance of community learning centres, encouraged by UNESCO. The centres are sustainable and self-sufficient places for lifelong learning opportunities available to the whole community, aiming to promote self-sufficiency, improve the quality of life and encourage community development (municipal, regional and national). Moreover, under the broader perspective of improving the quality of life of an entire community, a city should apply to become a UNESCO Learning City, a programme which aims to empower individuals and promote social cohesion, sustainable development and the cultural prosperity of that city.

Results of good practices

Besides having a good strategy and executing it well, the success of literacy practices and AE depends above all on the actual

programme that is being applied in learning spaces. Factors ranging from its management to the teaching methods applied in the classroom must be taken into account. Primarily, success depends on the effectiveness of their structure, organisation, management, content, assessment, monitoring and funding.

An analysis of 18 examples of good literacy and AE practices worldwide¹ was conducted. These 18 programmes are featured in the UNESCO-UIL Effective Literacy Practice Database.² The selected programmes had high success/retention rates of between 60 per cent and 90 per cent. Factors that make a difference to the success of such programmes were

identified. They were regarded as ‘good practices’ because the programmes managed to alphabetise most of the students who graduated from the programmes and/or successfully passed the final assessments. It is worth mentioning, however, that success rates also depend on the local reality and on what that locality considers successful.

The programmes analysed had a combination of several general success factors (Table 1), which derived from the experiences and challenges they encountered. Four categories were created to facilitate the explanation of the success factors: structure, content, target audience/environment and technical management.³

TABLE 1
Success factors for literacy and adult education programmes

Category	Success factors
Structure	<p>Offer different levels: basic, intermediate, advanced.</p> <p>Offer different stages of literacy: basic (literacy and numeracy), advanced, community development, technical and vocational; it is critical to have a post-literacy phase for students to apply and develop technical and vocational skills.</p> <p>Provide intergenerational programmes—e.g. family literacy, where mothers/parents and children are taught simultaneously.</p> <p>Promote post-literacy activities in the community and create literary community settings—e.g. offering mobile libraries across the city.</p> <p>Have a lifelong learning strategy—e.g. literacy complemented by training activities for technical-vocational skills and community development.</p> <p>Have medium- to long-term programmes: 6 months to 2 years.</p> <p>Include the community in the development and maintenance of the programme.</p> <p>Provide periodic training for managers, coordinators and educators.</p>
Content	<p>Apply an active, critical, creative and participatory teaching-learning methodology focused on meeting the students’ needs, experiences and realities—e.g. the Paulo Freire, PRA and Reflect methodologies.</p> <p>Use theoretical, visual and practical educational materials—e.g. books, student handbooks, visual displays, video, audio, painting, reading sessions, hands-on activities, newspapers/magazines, games, field visits, research, gamified activities etc.</p> <p>Provide materials and incentives for students—e.g. student manuals, books, stationery, transportation and meal tickets, day care etc.</p> <p>Include the community and students in the development of the curriculum.</p> <p>Use ICTs and social media networks in- and outside the classroom—e.g. computers, mobile phones, radio, interactive whiteboards, applications, social media networks, Internet etc.</p> <p>Include media and information literacy in the curriculum.</p> <p>Address interdisciplinary topics that are interesting and relevant to the target audience and community; tackle issues that fall under these four categories: language and communication, mathematics and calculations, social education and community development, technical and vocational education.</p>
Target audience/ environment	<p>Offer programmes for different target audiences—e.g. women, mothers, workers, out-of-school youth, elderly people, people with disabilities etc.</p> <p>Have adequate, available and stable places to conduct classes and welcome the public—e.g. spaces in associations, churches, government buildings, schools, public and cultural spaces etc.</p>
Technical management	<p>Forge and maintain partnerships within and outside the community to ensure technical, material, financial and infrastructure support.</p> <p>Conduct regular monitoring and evaluation activities.</p> <p>Have sustainable programmes and strategies.</p> <p>Carry out technical visits to monitor the performance and progress of activities.</p> <p>Convene regular meetings (weekly, monthly, semi-annual, annual) with stakeholders, partners, coordinators, educators and other actors involved.</p> <p>Execute a good communication strategy—e.g. television and radio campaigns etc.</p> <p>Forge and maintain political engagement and support.</p>

Conclusions

The best practice analysis above shows that although there are differences between contexts, realities, cultures and target audience, there are general factors that are fundamental to the success of any programme or public policy for youth and adult literacy and AE. Each factor can—and should—be adapted to the reality of the local context where the programme is to be carried out. It was noted also that literacy for youth and adults complements AE, and vice versa.

Some basic guidelines for the success of public policy in the area are:

- Carry out a needs analysis and identify the local learning gap
- Maintain the involvement of political authorities
- Create a mechanism to coordinate the initiatives
- Secure an effective funding mechanism
- Strengthen existing mechanisms
- Define terms of reference for the actors and partners involved
- Develop and implement a good communication strategy
- Establish and maintain partnerships
- Strengthen capacity regarding the implementation of public policies
- Strengthen capacity regarding the implementation of programmes
- Strengthen the capacities of human resources
- Innovate!

The analysis shows that innovative actions can help overcome challenges, propose solutions and achieve goals. The innovation and empowerment of the local population are the factors that make the difference: innovation to develop effective initiatives, and empowerment when it comes to designing and managing programmes by the community itself.

The methodology, curriculum and educators are the factors that make a difference in regards to the effectiveness of the programme to be applied in the classroom. These must be in harmony with the students' local needs and interests.

A strategy with a specific target audience may be more successful, since teaching and learning take place in more curated and dedicated environments for those specific students who need special support. For women, in some cases the environment created for them was fundamental for them to feel safe and have the courage to participate—behavioural and subjective factors that motivate women and facilitate their learning process.

To achieve concrete and significant results and to maintain them over time, youth and adult literacy and AE need to be designed and implemented from the perspective of lifelong learning. When literacy is considered as a continuum, there is no definite line between the classification of a literate and an illiterate person. Literacy initiatives should be implemented through a holistic lifelong learning approach, considering the principles of youth and adult learning and education, and incorporating content that is interesting and practical to reinforce the skills and knowledge relevant to the daily lives of young people and adults.

In addition, students need to have post-literacy opportunities available to apply their acquired knowledge and develop technical and vocational skills. Such a strategy would not only alphabetise youth and adults but would empower them with the tools necessary to contribute to the local socio-economic context and their community's quality of life. This gives them the view to a lighthouse—towards a lighted path, a direction and motivation to learn and continue applying what they have learned.

Literacy is an integral part of the right to education and serves as a tool for individual and community development. To accomplish this, the fundamental factors for the success of literacy and AE public policies discussed above should be applied and become a political and institutional part of an entire society. ■

1. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Cuba (and 28 countries), Jordan, Liberia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Peru, Senegal, South Africa, Turkey, Uruguay, Vietnam and Yemen.

2. See <<http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=4>>.

3. The structure involves the programme format, duration, actors involved, levels, stages or type etc. The content deals with the methodology, teaching methods and resources, curriculum, programme etc. The target audience/ environment involves the public and environment of the community where the programme is conducted. The technical management includes aspects such as the technical and financial support from partners or external entities and monitoring and evaluation activities.

References:

Aker, J.C., C. Ksoll, and T. Lybbert. 2012. "Can Mobile Phones Improve Learning? Evidence from a Field Experiment in Niger." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 4(4): 94–120.

Chu, S.K., and R. Bajracharya. 2011. *Regional Mid-Term Evaluation of Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE)*. Bangkok: UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education. <http://uil.unesco.org/fileadmin/keydocuments/Literacy/LIFE/Mid-termPackage/3_asia_regional_and_country_reports/3a_%20Regional_%20report_Asia/LIFE_Midterm_Evaluation_%20Report_Asia_Pacific.pdf>. Accessed 26 August 2016.

UNESCO-UIL. 2013. *Literacy and Women's Empowerment: Stories of Success and Inspiration*. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002234/223466E.pdf>>. Accessed 26 August 2016.

UNESCO-UIL. 2014. *Annual Report 2013*. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002269/226992E.pdf>>. Accessed 26 August 2016. UNITWIN. 2015. *Relatório final de Pesquisa - Aprendizagem Móvel no Canteiro de Obra*. Paris: UNESCO.

The views expressed in this brief are the authors' and not necessarily those of the Government of Brazil or the United Nations Development Programme.

International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth

United Nations Development Programme

SBS, Quadra 1, Bloco J, Ed. BNDES, 13º andar
70076-900 Brasília, DF - Brazil

Telephone: +55 61 2105 5000

E-mail: ipc@ipc-undp.org ■ URL: www.ipc-undp.org

