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DEPOIMENTO

Literacy Programmes for Adults: what can we expect?

Programa de Alfabetização de Adultos: o que nós podemos esperar?

Agneta LIND

ABSTRACT

These notes are personal reflections based on long experience from the field, global reviews and debates, and a large number of reports and studies on adult literacy programmes in developing countries.

Index Terms: adult literacy programs, developing countries, personal reflections.

RESUMO

Estas notas são reflexões pessoais baseadas em longa experiência no campo da educação de jovens e adultos: as revisões e os debates globais, e um grande número de relatórios e estudos em programas de instrução de adultos em países em vias de desenvolvimento.

Palavras-chave: educação de jovens e adultos, países em vias de desenvolvimento, reflexões pessoais.

RÉSUMÉ

Ces notes sont des réflexions personnelles basées sur une longue expérience dans le domaine de l'Éducation avec des jeunes et adultes, les révisions, les débats internationaux et un grand nombre de rapports d'études, concernant les programmes d'éducation des adultes, dans des pays en voie de développement.

Mots clés: pays en voie de développement, programmes d'instruction adulte, réflexions personnelles.

These notes are personal reflections based on long experience from the field, global reviews and debates, and a large number of reports and studies on adult literacy programmes in developing countries after more than 30 years of direct and indirect contact with literacy programmes for adults.

I do not agree with those who describe a programme as a disaster or as a failure because 50% of the enrolled learners have dropped out. On the contrary, it is a success, if half of the learners who enroll stay and learn the minimum necessary in order to be able to read and write more or less independently (See e.g. LAUGLO, 2001).

Adults who go to literacy classes, and most of those who need to learn to read and write, are people living in poverty (UNESCO, 2005). They are the ones who have not been given a chance to go to or to finish school. They are the ones who do not have a place at home where they can read or write, or who cannot even afford to buy a newspaper, much less a book. They are among the disadvantaged who do not have electricity or water at home. They are the parents who do not always afford to have their children in school. They are the ones who do not always eat a full meal per day. They are the ones who more easily get sick than people with more education, and when they are sick, who cannot afford fast transport to the clinic or to buy the medicine they are pre-scribed.

Many interviewed learners have explained why they had to stop going to classes, not because they wanted to, but because they had no choice. They stress that they really wish to continue and may come back when life circumstances allow (see e.g. LIND, 1996).

The only time I have seen classes full of men, not a majority of women, was in men-only classes. This was in Mozambique, in 1979, when all companies, public or private, were encouraged, almost compelled, to teach their workers literacy. I was observing and assisting two classes among fishermen who studied literacy half the day and worked on repairing

their boats and nets the other half of their day in the port of Maputo (the capital city). Most of them had never been to school. Those who had been to school for two or more years were chosen as literacy tutors. They were all very enthusiastic, although many struggled to learn to read and write in Portuguese, the official language, that they did not master very well. But some advanced very fast. Even in the breaks they would be practicing to read the primers. The Mozambican literacy campaigns during that first post-independence period (more or less between 1975 and 1983) focused on workers and other persons considered crucial for the national economic and political goals (LIND, 1988). Many of them were men. Special intensive courses were also organized for women only, by the mass organization for women. In some factories, the workers were mostly women, so all learners in those cases were women.

Gender has wrongly become attention to women only, instead of to equality between women and men. Gender equality is what we should worry about, which means equal opportunities, equal rights and responsibilities. Women and men should have equal rights to influence, participate in, and benefit from programmes. This of course does not mean they cannot have separate timetables and gender specific programmes. Probably they should.

We need to find creative ways of attracting men to literacy and further adult education programmes. We cannot continue to offer classes only in the afternoons. We cannot continue to focus contents on women's issues alone, such as childcare, cleaning etc. This does not mean these issues are not important for men to learn. But the entry points need to be broadened and the programmes include issues that men normally are interested in. How otherwise would men become motivated? Why not address sports, jobs, politics etc? Which of course are not exclusively for men to learn; Literacy for women only is not going to lead to gender equality.

I have been to so (too) many international conferences, meetings and workshops on literacy, non-formal education or adult learning in general.

Everyone comes with their own ideas of what the topic is about. Literacy seems to be conceived as magic full of solutions for the wishful. The revolutionaries wish to change the world through literacy. So did I 35 years ago. The promoters of economic growth and capitalism wish to increase competitiveness and productivity through literacy. The volunteer development workers wish to prevent HIV/AIDS and reduce poverty through literacy. Social movements wish to mobilize through literacy. The idealists wish to create jobs through literacy. The community organizations wish to decentralize governance through literacy. Such magic perceptions of literacy lead to confusion.

The leading international organizations, such as UNESCO, should have helped to stop such confusions by being consistent and clear. Instead they seem to have contributed to the confusions, especially after the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) in Jomtien in 1990 (TORRES, 2002; 2004). Then the concept of literacy, especially for adults, was replaced by the even more vague term Non-Formal Education (NFE), by UNESCO, UNICEF and many development agencies and NGOs. Why? Already toward the end of the 1980's the influence of the World Bank (one of the major sponsors of the WCEFA) on the education sector of poor dependant countries had started having a negative impact on the literacy agenda of many of them. Adult basic education and literacy was simply removed from the area of state responsibility. In Africa I know of three countries where the WB was behind the dismantling of the existing ministry departments and budgets available for adult education and literacy (LIND, 2002).

This, together with the entry of new big UN agencies, such as UNICEF, into the EFA agenda, contributed to the gradual transfer of attention from literacy for adults to what was called NFE for youth and children. NFE used to refer to a broad array of adult education programmes. Now there was talk and projects about NFE for out-of-school children. And it became

popular among some agencies to promote NFE meaning practical skill training. The confusions were gradually extended to governments, funding agencies, NGO's and academics alike.

Providing initial literacy programmes for adults will not eliminate poverty. Literacy helps people to cope better with their lives, but is not magic. It is important to remember, though, that literacy is fostered by overall human development and poverty elimination. Why do we not just accept that in today's world everyone needs, and has the right to, literacy, i.e. the skills and practices of reading and writing all kinds of texts, pictures, graphs and numbers, whether digital, printed, or hand-written?

With the fall of the Berlin wall, it seems that literacy ceased to represent a red rag to a bull. At least this could be an explanation for the current apparently increasing interest among donors and governments to accept the importance of literacy programmes for adults, and actually provide funding. The problem is, as always with adult literacy provision, that there are so many eager promoters of some specific favored approach that allegedly is the best and most efficient solution.

The family literacy approach, in which mothers and children learn together as part of pre-school activities, is promoted by Mrs Laura Bush, the Honorary Ambassador to the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003 – 2012) and the initiator of a Global Campaign for literacy, backed up by UNESCO. While this seems to be designed to be home based (and immune to stirring up any social movements or demands? Or even involving any responsibility of governments?), the competing Cuban global mass literacy project *Yo, Si Puedo* claims it can achieve mass literacy in two to three months through radio, TV or video tapes. The Cuban government has managed to convince a number of governments and some NGOs in Latin America and Africa that they can provide a package that works. They send along Cuban advisors (almost none of whom has experience of designing or teach-

ing literacy for adults, because it is a long time ago Cuba had an illiteracy problem) who bring the methodology (LIND, 2008).

The Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE), led by UNESCO as way of implementing UNLD, is more open, but like the other global initiatives, does not bring much in the way of money and resources. The idea is (UNESCO, 2006) that participating countries set their own priorities for action in the strategic areas advocacy and communication, and strengthening capacities for the development of policies and the delivery of empowering literacy programmes.

The question is in what way national literacy initiatives are encouraged or intersected by the international or external projects. I have seen what is happening here in Mozambique where I live and work, again over the last six years or so. There is a national adult literacy strategy and delivery mechanism. Facilitators are contracted on a yearly basis for teaching part-time. Every school director is accountable for adult literacy classes around his/her school. In fact, adult literacy classes are spread all over as a normal activity of the education system in Mozambique. Every impulse from outside, especially if it comes with money or political agreements (Cuba), is accepted, and added to whatever else is already going on. I feel sorry for the local implementers, who cannot help but get confused. The classes doing the radio based Cuban approach are called listening groups and the other classes are suddenly called “aulas presenciais”, ie presence (in contrast to distance) classes. This is confusing because there are no classes which do not meet at a certain time with their facilitators. It is just rhetorical terminology that comes with the package. This would not be an issue if it really were true that learners could become literate in three months by listening to the teacher on the radio – in a foreign language (Portuguese).

Another confusing approach the district supervisors have to deal with is the so-called regenerated Freirean literacy through empowering community techniques (REFLECT), which is adopted by many small for-

eign NGO-run projects. They call their own classes non-formal and all other literacy classes “formal”. The “non-formal”, it is stressed, is indicated by the learners sitting in a circle, not in rows like the “formal”, by not using primers, by teaching and learning in mother tongue not Portuguese like in most other classes, and by teaching community development skills, not “just literacy”! The only problem is that learners want books and wish to learn Portuguese as quickly as possible. So when there are normal literacy classes and REFLECT classes in the same village, the learners abandon REFLECT and go to the “formal”.

The confusions and dichotomies created by inflexible and pre-determined package approaches, coming from outside, are nonsense. They should not be accepted.

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