

BALID

Literacy – Unfashionable and Unfundable?

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The following post-discussion thoughts were provided by participants and Juliet McCaffery.

Literacy is by no means unfashionable and, as the largest element in many government budgets is education, neither is it unfundable. The skills of reading, writing and written calculation are well recognised as essential to current forms of social organisation, economic production and human well being. What is unfashionable –and has been since the 1960s- is the separation of those skills from contexts of use. What is less easily fundable is the separation of instruction in contexts of use from firmly organised and institutionalised classrooms. Literacy programmes for adults have tended to be not embedded in contexts of use and not conducted in institutionalised classrooms.

By and large – there are many quotable exceptions – charitable educational organisations are more effective and reliable providers than government agencies of educational programmes for poor and particularly rural adults in less firmly organised settings.

Just as educators work to tailor curricula to the interests of their prospective learners, so they should tailor their efforts to attract funds to the interests of prospective funding bodies. Currently, governmental or bilateral funding agencies say that they aim to fit their funding to the expressed priorities of their partner governments. Charitable organisations preparing ‘bilateral’ proposals to benefit the peoples of particular partner governments should ascertain the priorities that those governments are expressing to the bilateral in view and tailor the proposals accordingly.

Proposals for private funding bodies need to be correspondingly closely tailored to their interests and priorities.

John Oxenham

This is a tricky question to answer because a lot depends on what mean by literacy! We don't make life easy for ourselves when we variously think of literacy for adults or for children (or both), in non-formal or formal settings. Do we use “literacy” as a code for education or schooling, or as something entirely different?

The conclusion of our discussion in my view was that literacy (especially for adults) may well be unfashionable but that it is not necessarily unfundable. We are certainly living at a time when literacy (except in the form of primary schooling) is low on the agenda of funding agencies and donors, as evidenced by relatively weak impact of the UNESCO International Literacy Decade and the inattention to literacy in the

MDGs, but it should not be assumed that there is no hope for obtaining funding for literacy projects. Obtaining funding for literacy is extremely difficult, requiring a good deal of expertise and a willingness to invest enormous amounts of energy and resources in the process, but some funding can be found. There is no recipe for success but the art seems to be in submitting applications to the most receptive organisations and in combining literacy with the specific interests of those organisations e.g. health, agriculture. Currently smaller independent funding bodies are more likely to be receptive to this kind of approach than the major international and national agencies which are possibly more subject to the transient emphases of official policies. Family literacy approaches may well be attractive to funders who prioritise primary schooling for children.

We occupy a very important place between local NGOs and out of country funding sources. Our role is to help local partners to have voice and perhaps to aim higher than they may believe they can achieve. Let's not give up!

Ian Cheffy

We considered the reasons why literacy programmes might be perceived as being currently 'unfashionable'.

The answer is partly that other types of input, particularly in the education sector, have taken priority and become 'fashionable'. The most obvious of these is Primary School Education – the universal achievement of which is EFA Goal 2 and MDG goal 2 and more latterly Secondary School Education.

We asserted that if the EFA and MDGs are examined more closely it becomes clear that literacy competence of both adults and children underpins the majority of them. Our task then becomes one of articulation of the role literacy plays in the education and development of individuals and societies.

Secondly, literacy has become unfashionable because of a shift away from a rights-based approach towards a pragmatic view of development as a prerequisite for economic, political and social stability. Funders seem to be looking for proven strategies and models to improve livelihoods and prospects in the poorest countries. (We might link this to recent global financial climate which has led to a leaning towards lower risk, less ideological approaches.)

Family learning programmes are one example of presenting adult literacy as essentially functional in that adults with improved literacy skills are better able to support their children's education at school and at home. Adult literacy skills are often presented as a happy side benefit to the primary aim of the project which is to contribute to the successful education of children. Whilst it may be the case that adults engaged in these programmes are motivated by the desire to support their children's education, as such these initiatives do not appeal to a rights-based view. In conclusion, what has become unfashionable and therefore less easily fundable, is literacy for literacy's sake, which we might otherwise describe as an adult's right to education.

Sally Prichard

Is literacy fundable? One of the first sound-bites was 'yes – fundable when functional'. We believe that literacy alone is meaningless and unsustainable without a purpose, an outlet, an application - hence embedding literacy in health, land rights, in anything and everything....

Is it ok that we promote literacy as a cross-cutting theme to all our work, but never the primary outcome? This can result in it being hidden away in projects with worthy (but limited) activities such as ensuring materials are accessible to those with limited or no literacy skills, rather than allocating adequate resources to enable people to gain and use literacy skills, thereby joining the literate society and using those skills to enhance their lives in a multiplicity of (sometimes unpredictable) ways.

We talk of literacy supporting progress towards the MDGs, especially 1: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger, 2: Achieve universal primary education, 3: Promote gender equality and empower women, 4: Reduce child mortality, 5: Improve maternal health, 7: Ensure environmental sustainability. However, right now funders want quick win answers before the clock on MDGs runs out. So (perhaps) the real time for literacy to be seen as a key to achievement of the MDGs was a decade or more ago.

As practitioners and academics committed to (adult) literacy we readily share the life-changing impact of acquiring literacy on people, especially women, who have gained confidence and self-esteem alongside literacy skills. Many have gone on to use their initiative and creativity to change their lives and often those around them. Donors want to be sure that '83.6% will increase their household income by 65.4%'. However, many of the ways individuals use literacy are unpredictable. Again we come back to the question of not just measuring impact, but predicting it accurately at the programme writing stage.

The current DFID agenda does not see adult literacy as an obvious vehicle to meet its goals of skills, employment and reduced health risks. And of course, with the end of the UN Literacy Decade in 2012, where does this leave literacy on the international agenda? It is our collective role, therefore, to be more explicit about the role literacy can play in achieving specific outcomes and in lobbying 'recipient' countries to get adult literacy on their in-country priority lists.

And thank goodness for some of the independent donors with their own agendas and willingness to engage in dialogue about the value of literacy-based programmes for marginalised groups.

Katy Newell-Jones

I interpret the word literacy as the ability to read and write the text necessary to undertake a particular task at a particular time in a particular social and cultural context. As we know large scale government programs have difficulty in addressing the literacy required in different contexts.

The other issue for governments, as has been mentioned, is the need for clear outcomes in order to justify the cost, and I believe this is an area we should attempt

to improve on whatever the context. We all know most people become more confident and we can all quote from individuals who express this in many different ways, but for large amounts of money to be invested, the outcomes need to be clearer. I am not suggesting the UK measures –Entry levels 1,2, and 3 and Levels 1,2 and 3 should be adopted as for me they represent a functional approach divorced from the context. Somehow context and measurement of outcomes should be combined. More research should be done in this area. It is not only governments who need to justify the outcomes as anyone who has received funding from the Big Lottery knows. If literacy is part of an agricultural programme what reading and writing should the participants be able to do at the end. In a programme for parents perhaps a task to measure would be the ability to write a note to the school explaining a child's absence or reading the school's newsletter.

Abadzi's notable comment about the impact of literacy on economic development has been discredited, but nothing has replaced it. Literacy is fundable but we need to make the reasons for funding, and the resulting outcomes, much clearer.

Juliet McCaffery